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"HE PRODUCED A SMALL GOLD WATCH WITH THE WORD 'RITA' ENGRAVED UPON THE CASE."

A Forest Hearth

A ROMANCE OF INDIANA IN THE THIRTIES

BY

CHARLES MAJOR

AUTHOR OF "DOROTHY VERNON OF HADDON HALL," "THE BEARS OF BLUE RIVER," "WHEN KNIGHTHOOD WAS IN FLOWER," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY CLYDE O. DELAND

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ON THE HEART OF THE HEARTH

A Forest Hearth

CHAPTER I

On the Heart of the Hearth

A STRENUOUS sense of justice is the most disturbing of all virtues, and those persons in whom it predominates are usually as disagreeable as they are good. Any one who assumes the high plane of "justice to all, and confusion to sinners," may easily gain a reputation for goodness simply by doing nothing bad. Look wise and heavenward, frown severely but regretfully upon others' faults, and the world will whisper, "Ah, how good he is!" And you will be good — as the sinless, prickly pear. If the virtues of omission constitute saintship, and from a study of the calendar one might so conclude, seek your corona by the way of justice. For myself, I would rather be a layman with a few active virtues and a small sin or two, than a sternly just saint without a fault. Breed virtue in others by giving them something to forgive. Conceive, if you can, the unutterable horror of life in this world without a few blessed human faults. He who sins not at all, cannot easily find reason to forgive; and to forgive those who trespass against us, is one of the sweetest benedictions of life. I have known many persons who built their moral structure upon the single rock of justice; but they all bred wretchedness among those who loved them, and made life harder because they did not die young.

One woman of that sort, I knew, — Mrs. Margarita Bays. To her face, or in the presence of those who might repeat my words, I of course called her "Mrs. Bays"; but when I felt safe in so doing, I called her the "Chief Justice" — a title conferred by my friend, Billy Little. Later happenings in her life caused Little to christen her "my Lady Jeffreys," a sobriquet bestowed upon her because of the manner in which she treated her daughter, whose name was also Margarita.

The daughter, because she was as sweet as the wild rose, and as gentle as the soft spring sun, received from her friends the affectionate diminutive of Rita. And so I shall name her in this history.

Had not Rita been so gentle, yielding, and submissive, or had her father, Tom Bays, — husband to the Chief Justice, — been more combative and less amenable to the corroding influences of henpeck, I doubt if Madam Bays would ever have attained a dignity beyond that of "Associate Justice." That strong sense of domineering virtue which belongs to the truly just must be fed, and it waxes fat on an easy-going husband and a loving, tender daughter.

In the Bays home, the mother's righteous sense of justice and duty, which applied itself relentlessly upon husband and daughter, became the weakest sort of indulgence when dealing with the only son and heir. Without being vicious, Tom, Jr., was what the negroes called "jes' clean triflin'," and dominated his mother with an inherited club of inborn selfishness. Before Tom's selfishness, Justice threw away her scales and became maudlin sentiment.

I have been intimately acquainted with the Bays family ever since they came to Blue River settlement from North Carolina, and I am going to tell you the story of the sweetest, gentlest nature God has ever given me to know — Rita Bays. I warn you there will be no heroics in this history, no palaces, no grand people — nothing but human

nature, the forests, and a few very simple country folk indeed.

Rita was a babe in arms when her father, her mother, and her six-year-old brother Tom moved from North Carolina in two great "schooner" wagons, and in the year '20 or '21 settled upon Blue River, near the centre of a wilderness that had just been christened "Indiana."

The father of Tom Bays had been a North Carolina planter of considerable wealth and culture; but when the old gentleman died there were eight sons and two daughters among whom his estate was to be divided, and some of them had to choose between moving west and facing the terrors of battle with nature in the wilderness, and remaining in North Carolina to become "poor white trash." Tom Bays, Sr., had married Margarita, daughter of a pompous North Carolinian, Judge Anselm Fisher. Whether he was a real judge, or simply a "Kentucky judge," I cannot say; but he was a man of good standing, and his daughter was not the woman to endure the loss of caste at home. If compelled to step down from the social position into which she had been born, the step must be taken among strangers, that part at least of her humiliation might be avoided.

With a heart full of sorrow and determination, Madam Bays, who even then had begun to manifest rare genius for leadership, loaded two "schooners" with her household goods, her husband, her son, and her daughter, and started northwest with the laudable purpose of losing herself in the wilderness. They carried with them their inheritance, a small bag of gold, and with it they purchased from the government a quarter-section — one hundred and sixty acres — of land, at five shillings per acre. The land on Blue was as rich and fertile as any the world could furnish; but for miles upon miles it was covered with black forests, almost impenetrable to man, and was infested by

wild beasts and Indians. Here madam and her husband began their long battle with the hardest of foes — nature; and that battle, the terrors of which no one can know who has not fought it, doubtless did much to harden the small portion of human tenderness with which God had originally endowed her. They built their log-cabin on the east bank of Blue River, one mile north of the town of the same name. The river was spoken of simply as Blue.

Artistic beauty is not usually considered an attribute of log-cabins; but I can testify to the beauty of many that stood upon the banks of Blue, — among them the house of Bays. The main building consisted of two ground-floor rooms, each with a front door and a half-story room above. A clapboard-covered porch extended across the entire front of the house, which faced westward toward Blue. Back of the main building was a one-story kitchen, and adjoining each ground-floor room was a huge chimney, built of small logs four to six inches in diameter. These chimneys, thickly plastered on the inside with clay, were built with a large opening at the top, and widened downward to the fireplace, which was eight or ten feet square, and nearly as high as the low ceiling of the room. The purpose of these generous dimensions was to prevent the wooden chimney from burning. The fire, while the chimney was new, was built in the centre of the enormous hearth that the flames might not touch the walls, but after a time the heat burnt the clay to the hardness of brick, and the fire was then built against the back wall. By pointing up the cracks, and adding a coat of clay now and then, the walls soon became entirely fireproof, and a fire might safely be kindled that would defy Boreas in his bitterest zero mood. An open wood fire is always cheering; so our humble folk of the wilderness, having little else to cheer them during the long winter evenings, were mindful to be prodigal in the matter of fuel, and often

burned a cord of wood between candle-light and bedtime on one of their enormous hearths. A cord of wood is better than a play for cheerfulness, and a six-foot backlog will make more mirth than Dan Rice himself ever created. Economy did not enter into the question, for wood was nature's chief weapon against her enemies, the settlers; and the question was not how to save, but how to burn it.

To this place Rita first opened the eyes of her mind. The girl's earliest memories were of the cozy log-cabin upon the banks of the limpid, gurgling creek. Green in her memory, in each sense of the word, was the soft blue-grass lawn, that sloped gently a hundred yards from the cabin, built upon a little rise in the bottom land, down to the water's edge. Often when she was a child, and I a man well toward middle life, did I play with the enchanting little elf upon the blue-grass lawn, and drink the waters of perennial youth at the fountain of her sweet babyhood. Vividly I remember the white-skinned sycamores, the gracefully drooping elms, and the sweet-scented honey-locust that grew about the cabin and embowered it in leafy glory. Even at this long distance of time, when June is abroad, if I catch the odor of locust blossoms, my mind and heart travel back on the wings of a moment, and I hear the buzzing of the wild bees, the song of the meadow-lark, the whistle of bob-white, and the gurgling of the creek — all blended into one sweet refrain like the mingling tones of a perfect orchestra by the soft-voiced babble of my wee girl-baby friend. I close my eyes, and see the house amid the hollyhocks and trees, a thin line of blue smoke curling lazily from the kitchen chimney and floating away over the deep, black forest to the north and east. I see the maples languidly turning the white side of their leaves to catch the south wind's balmy breath, and I see by my side a fate-charged, tiny tot, dabbling in the water, mocking the songs of the birds, and ever turning her

face, with its great brown wistful eyes, to catch the breath of destiny and to hear the sad dread hum of the future. But my old chum Billy Little was the child's especial friend.

In those good times there was another child, a boy, Diccon Bright, who often came down from his cabin home a mile up river to play with Rita on the blue-grass lawn in summer, or to sit with her on the hearth log in winter. In cold weather the hearth log was kept on one side of the hearth, well within the fireplace itself, ready for use when needed. It gloried in three names, all of which were redolent of home. It was called the "hearth log" because it was kept upon the hearth; the "waiting log" because it was waiting to take the place of the log that was burning, and the "ciphering log" because the children sat upon it in the evening firelight to do their "ciphering" — a general term used to designate any sort of preparation for the morrow's lesson. In those times arithmetic was the chief study, and from it the acquisition of all branches of knowledge took the name of ciphering.

Diccon — where on earth his parents got the name, I cannot tell — was four or five years older than Rita. He was a manly boy, and when my little friend could hardly lisp his name she would run to him with the unerring instinct of childhood and nestle in his arms or cling to his helpful finger. The little fellow was so sturdy, strong, and brave, and his dark gray eyes were so steadfast and true, that she feared no evil from him, though ordinarily she was a timid child. She would sit by him on the ciphering log during the long winter evenings, and the boy, the girl, and the fire were the best of friends, and had glorious times together on the heart of the cheery hearth. The north wind might blow, the snow might snow, and the cold might freeze, Rita, Dic, and the fire cared not a straw.

"I want no better mirror, my little sweetheart," he would say, "than your brown eyes; no prettier color than

your rosy cheeks and glossy black hair, and no truer friend than your loving little heart." And the fire crackled its entire approval.

"Very well, Dic," she would reply, laughing with delight, "if you really want them, you may have them; they are all yours." And the fire smiled rosily, beaming its benediction.

"But what will your father and mother say and Tom?" asked Dic.

"We'll not tell them," replied this tiny piece of Eve; and the fire almost choked itself with spluttering laughter. So, with the fire as a witness, the compact was made and remade many times, until she thought she belonged to Dic and gloried in her little heart because of it.

Diccon and Rita's brother, Tom, even during their early childhood, when they were hardly half so tall as the guns they carried, were companion knights in the great wars waged by the settlers against the wild beasts of the forests, and many a bear, wolf, wildcat, and deer fell before the prowess of small Sir Diccon la Valorous and little Sir Thomas de Triflin'. Out of their slaughter grew friendship, and for many years Sir Thomas was a frequent guest upon the ciphering log of Sir Diccon, and Sir Diccon spent many winter evenings on the hearth at Castle Bays.

As the long years of childhood passed, Dic began to visit the Bays home more frequently than Tom visited the Brights'. I do not know whether this change was owing to the increasing age of the boys, or — but Rita was growing older and prettier every day, and you know that may have had something to do with Dic's visits.

Dic had another boy friend — an old boy, of thirty-five or more — whose name was William Little. He was known generally as Billy Little, and it pleased the little fellow to be so called, "Because," said he, "persons give the diminutive to fools and those whom they love; and I

know I am not a fool." The sweetest words in the German language are their home diminutives. It is difficult to love a man whom one *must* call Thomas. Tom, Jack, and Billy are the chaps who come near to us.

Billy was an old bachelor and an Englishman. His family had intended him for the church, and he was educated at Trinity with that end in view. Although not an irreligious man, he had views on religion that were far from orthodox.

"I found it impossible," he once remarked, "to induce the church to change its views, and equally impossible to change my own; so the church and I, each being unreasonably stubborn, agreed to disagree, and I threw over the whole affair, quarrelled with my family, was in turn thrown over by them, and here I am, in the wilderness, very much pleased."

He lived in the little town of Blue River, and was justice of the peace, postmaster, storekeeper, and occasionally school-teacher. He was small in stature, with a tendency to become rotund as he grew older. He took pride in his dress and was as cleanly as an Englishman. He was reasonably willing to do the duty that confronted him, and loved but three forms of recreation, — to be with his two most intimate friends, Rita and Dic, to wander in the trackless forests, and to play upon his piano. His piano was his sweetheart, and often in the warm summer evenings, when his neighbors were in bed, would the strains of his music lull them to sleep, and float out into the surrounding forests, awakening the whippoorwill to heart-rending cries of anguish that would give a man the "blues" for a month. I believe many ignorant persons thought that Billy was not exactly "right in the top," as they put it, because he would often wander through the forests, night or day, singing to himself, talking to the trees and birds, and clasping to his soul fair nature in her virgin strength and sweetness. He

often communed with himself after this fashion: "I am a fortunate man in the things I love, for I have them to my heart's content. Rita and Dic are children. I give them knowledge. They give me youth. I touch my piano. It fills my soul with peace. If it gives me a discordant note, the fault is mine. I go to the forest, and sweet Nature takes me in her arms and lulls me to ecstasy."

Billy Little and I had been college chums, and had emigrated on the same ship. I studied law, entered the practice, married, and have a family. While my wife and family did not mar the friendship between Little and myself, it prevented frequency of intercourse, for a wife and family are great absorbents. However, he and I remained friends, and from him I have most of the facts constituting this story.

This friend of Dic's was a great help to the boy intellectually, and at fourteen or fifteen years of age, when other boys considered their education complete if they could spell phthisis and Constantinople, our hero was reading Virgil and Shakespeare, and was learning to think for himself. The knowledge obtained from Billy Little the boy tried to impart to Rita. Tom held learning and books to be effeminate and wasteful of time; but Rita drank in Dic's teaching, with now and then a helpful draught from Billy Little, and the result soon began to show upon the girl.

Thus it was that Dic often went to see Tom, but talked to Tom's sister. Many an evening, long after Tom had unceremoniously climbed the rude stairway to bed, would the brown-eyed maid, with her quaint, wistful touch of womanhood, sit beside Dic on the ciphering log inside the fireplace, listening to him read from one of Billy Little's books, watching him trace continents, rivers, and mountains on a map, or helping him to cipher a complicated problem in arithmetic. The girl by no means understood

all that Dic read, but she tried, and even though she failed, she would clasp her hands and say, "Isn't it grand, Dic?" And it was grand to her because Dic read it.

Lamps were unknown to our simple folk, so the light of the fireplace was all they had to read by. It was, therefore, no uncommon sight in those early cabin homes to see the whole family sitting upon the broad hearth, shading their eyes with their hands, while some one — frequently the local school-teacher — sat upon the hearth log and read by the fire that furnished both light and heat. This reading was frequently Dic's task in the Bays home.

One who has seen a large family thus gathered upon the spacious hearth will easily understand the love for it that ages ago sprang up in the hearts of men and crickets. At no place in all the earth, and at no time in all its history, has the hearth done more in moulding human character than it did in the wilderness on the north side of the lower Ohio when the men who felled the forest and conquered nature offered their humble devotions on its homely altar.

So it came to pass that Dic and Rita grew up together on the heart of the hearth; and what wonder that their own hearts were welded by the warmth and light of its cheery god. Thus the boy grew to manhood and the girl to maidenhood, then to young womanhood, at which time, of course, her troubles began.

Chief among the earlier troubles of our little maid was a growing tenderness for Dic. Of that trouble she was not for many months aware. She was unable to distinguish between the affection she had always given him and the warming tenderness she was beginning to feel, save in her disinclination to make it manifest. When with him she was under a constraint as inexplicable to her as it was annoying. It brought grief to her tender heart, since it led her into little acts of rudeness or neglect, which in turn always led to tears. She often blamed Dic for the altered

condition, though it was all owing to the change in herself. There was no change in him. He sought the girl's society as frankly as when they were children, though at the time of which I write he had made no effort to "keep company" with her. She, at fifteen, believing herself to be a young lady, really wished for the advances she feared. Sukey Yates, who was only fourteen, had "company" every Sunday evening, and went to all the social frolics for miles around. Polly Kaster, not sixteen, was soon to be married to Bantam Rhodes. Many young men had looked longingly upon Rita, who was the most beautiful girl on Blue; but the Chief Justice, with her daughter's hearty approval, drove all suitors away. The girl was wholly satisfied with Dic, who was "less than kin," but very much "more than kind." He came to see the family, herself included; but when he went out to social functions, church socials, cornhuskings, and dances he took Sukey Yates, or some other girl, and upon such evenings our own little maiden went to bed dissatisfied with the world at large, and herself in particular. Of course, she would not have gone to dances, even with Dic. She had regard for the salvation of her soul, and the Chief Justice, in whom the girl had unquestioning faith, held dancing to be the devil's chief instrument of damnation. Even the church socials were not suitable for young girls, as you will agree if you read farther; and Mrs. Margarita, with a sense of propriety inherited from better days, tried to hold her daughter aloof from the country society, which entertained honest but questionable views on many subjects.

Dic paid his informal visit to the Bays household in the evenings, and at the time of the girl's growing inclination she would gaze longingly up the river watching for him; while the sun, regretful to leave the land, wherein her hero dwelt, sank slowly westward to shine upon those poor waste places that knew no Diccon. When she would see

him coming she would run away for fear of herself, and seek her room in the loft, where she would scrub her face and hands in a hopeless effort to remove the sun-brown. Then she would scan her face in a mirror, for which Dic had paid two beautiful bearskins, hoping to convince herself that she was not altogether hideous.

"If I could only be half as pretty as Sukey Yates," she often thought, little dreaming that Sukey, although a very pretty girl, was plain compared with her own winsome self.

After the scrubbing she would take from a little box the solitary piece of grandeur she possessed, — a ribbon of fiery red, — and with this around her neck or woven through the waving floods of her black hair, she felt she was bedecked like a veritable queen of hearts. But the ribbon could not remove all doubts of herself, and with tears ready to start from her eyes she would stamp her foot and cry out: "I hate myself. I am an ugly fool." Then she would slowly climb down the rude stairway, and, as we humble folk would say, "take out her spite" against herself on poor Dic. She was not rude to him, but, despite her inclination, she failed to repay his friendliness in kind as of yore.

Tom took great pleasure in teasing her, and chuckled with delight when his indulgent mother would tell her visiting friends that he was a great tease.

One evening when Rita had encountered more trouble than usual with the sun-brown, and was more than ever before convinced that she was a fright and a fool, she went downstairs, wearing her ribbon, to greet Dic, who was sitting on the porch with father, mother, and Tom. When she emerged from the front door, Tom, the teaser, said: —

"Oh, just look at her! She's put on her ribbon for Dic." Then, turning to Dic, "She run to her room and spruced up when she saw you coming."

Dic laughed because it pleased him to think, at least to

hope, that Tom had spoken the truth. Poor Rita in the midst of her confusion misunderstood Dic's laughter; and, smarting from the truth of Tom's words, quickly retorted: —

"You're a fool to say such a thing, and if — if — if — Mr. — Mr. Bright believes it, he is as great a fool as you."

"Mr. Bright!" cried de Triflin'. "My, but she's getting stylish!"

Rita looked at Dic after she spoke, and the pain he felt was so easily discernible on his face that she would have given anything, even the ribbon, to have had her words back, or to have been able to cry out, "I didn't mean it, Dic; I didn't mean it."

But the words she had spoken would not come back, and those she wanted to speak would not come forward, so tears came instead, and she ran to her loft, to do penance in sobs greatly disproportionate to her sin.

Soon Dic left, and as he started up the forest path she tried by gazing at him from her window to make him know the remorse she felt. She wanted to call to him, but she dared not; then she thought to escape unseen from the house and run after him. But darkness was rapidly falling, and she feared the black, terrible forest.

We talk a great deal about the real things of after life; but the real things of life, the keen joys and the keenest pains, come to a man before his first vote, and to a woman before the days of her mature womanhood.

THE BACHELOR HEART

CHAPTER II

The Bachelor Heart

RITA'S first great pain kept her sleepless through many hours. She resolved that when Dic should come again she would throw off the restraint that so hurt and provoked her, and would show him, at whatever cost, that she had not intended her hard words for him.

The next day seemed an age. She sought all kinds of work to make the time pass quickly. Churning, usually irksome, was a luxury. She swept every nook and corner of the house, and longed to sweep the whole farm.

That evening she did not wait till Dic was in sight to put on her ribbon. She changed it many times from her throat to her hair and back again, long before the sun had even thought of going down.

Her new attitude toward Dic had at least one good effect: it took from her the irritation she had so often felt against herself. Losing part of her self-consciousness in the whirl of a new, strong motive, wrought a great change, not only in her appearance, but also in her way of looking at things — herself included. She was almost satisfied with the image her mirror reflected. She might well have been entirely satisfied. There was neither guile nor vanity in the girl's heart, nor a trace of deceit in her face; only gentleness, truth, and beauty. She had not hitherto given much thought to her face; but with the change in her way of seeing Dic, her eyes were opened to the value of personal beauty. Then she began to wonder. Regret for her hard

words to Dic deepened her longing for beauty, in the hope that she might be admired by him and more easily forgiven. Billy Little, who had seen much of the world, once said that there was a gentleness and beauty about Rita at this time which he believed no other woman ever possessed. She was child and woman then, and that combination is hard to beat, even in a plain girl. Poor old Billy Little! He was more than thirty years her senior, but I believe there is no period in the life of a bachelor, however case-hardened he may be, when his heart is entirely safe from the enemy. That evening Rita sat on the porch watching for Dic. But the sun and her heart went down, and Dic did not come.

The plaintive rain cry of a whippoorwill from the branches of a dead tree across the river, and the whispering "peep, peep, peep," of the sleepy robins in the foliage near the house, helped to deepen her feeling of disappointment, and she was thoroughly miserable. She tried to peer through the gloaming, and feared her father and mother would mark her troubled eagerness and guess its cause. But her dread of their comments was neutralized by the fear that Dic would not come.

Opportunity is the touchstone of fate, save with women. With them it is fate itself. Had Dic appeared late that evening, there would have been a demonstration on Rita's part, regardless of who might have seen, and the young man would have discovered an interesting truth. Rita, deeply troubled, discovered it for herself, and thought surely it was plain enough for every one else to see.

When darkness had fallen, she became reckless of concealment, and walked a short way up the river in the hope of meeting Dic. The hooting of an owl frightened her, but she did not retreat till she heard the howling of a wolf. Then she ran home at full speed and went to bed full of the most healthful suffering a heart can know — that which it feels because of the pain it has given another.

"SHE CHANGED IT MANY TIMES."

Thus Dic missed both opportunity and demonstration. The next evening he missed another opportunity, and by the morning of the third day our little girl, blushing at the thought, determined to write to him and ask his forgiveness. There was one serious obstacle to writing: she had neither paper nor ink, nor money with which to buy them. Hitherto she had found little use for money, but now the need was urgent. Tom always had money, and she thought of begging a few pennies from him. No! Tom would laugh, and refuse. If she should ask her mother, a string of questions would ensue, with "No" for a snapper. Her father would probably give her money, if she asked for it; but her mother would ask questions later. She would ride to town, one mile south on Blue, and ask credit of her old friend, Billy Little, to the extent of a sheet of paper and a small pot of ink. For a pen she would catch a goose, pluck a quill, and ask Billy to cut it. Billy could cut the best pen of any one on Blue.

Dinner over, she caught the goose after an exciting chase, plucked the quill, saddled her horse, and was slipping away from the back yard when her mother's voice halted her.

"Where are you going?" asked Mrs. Margarita.

"I'm — I'm — going — going to see Sukey Yates," answered the girl.

She had not intended going to Sukey's, but after her mother's peremptory demand for information, she formed the *ex post facto* resolution to do so, that her answer might not be a lie.

"Now, what on earth do you want there?" asked the Chief Justice.

"I — I only want to sit awhile with her," answered Rita. "May I go? The work is all done."

"No, you shan't go," responded the kind old lady. You see, one of the maxims of this class of good persons is

to avoid as many small pleasures as possible — in others. That they apply the rule to themselves, doesn't help to make it endurable.

Rita — with whom to hear was to obey — sprang from her horse; but just then her father came upon the scene. His soft words and soothing suggestions mollified Justice, and Rita started forth upon her visit to Sukey. She had told her mother she was going to see Sukey Yates; and when she thought upon the situation, she became convinced that her *ex post facto* resolution, even though honestly acted upon, would not avail her in avoiding a lie, unless it were carried out to the letter and in the spirit. There was not a lie in this honest girl — not a fractional part of a lie — from her toes to her head. She went straight to see Sukey, and did not go to town, though she might easily have done so. She did not fear discovery. She feared the act of secret disobedience, and above all she dreaded the lie. A strong motive might induce her to disobey, but the disobedience in that case would be open. She would go to Sukey's to-day. To-morrow she would go to town in open rebellion, if need be. The thought of rebellion caused her to tremble; but let the powers at home also tremble. Like many of us, she was brave for to-morrow's battle, since to-morrow never comes.

Rita was not in the humor to listen to Sukey's good-natured prattle, so her visit was brief, and she soon rode home, her heart full of trouble and rebellion. But the reward for virtue, which frequently fails to make its appearance, waited upon our heroine. When she was about to dismount at the home gate, her father called to her: —

"While you're on your horse, Rita, you might ride to town and ask Billy Little if there's a letter. The mail came in three days ago."

The monster, Rebellion, at once disappeared, and the girl, conscience-smitten, resolved never, never to entertain

him again. She rode down the river path through the forest, happy after many days of wretchedness.

Billy Little's store building consisted of two log-built rooms. The long front room was occupied by the store and post-office. The back room, as Billy said, was occupied by his piano and himself. When he saw Rita, clothed in dainty calico and smiles, gallop up to the hitching-post, his heart was filled with joy, his face beamed with pleasure, and his scalp was suffused by a rosy hue. Billy's smooth-shaven face was pale, the blood never mounting to his cheeks, so he made amends as best he could and blushed with the top of his head.

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"Good evening to you, Rita," he said, as he lifted her to the ground and hitched her horse. "I am delighted to see you. You come like the rosy sun after a rainy day."

"The sun doesn't come after the day, Billy Little," retorted the laughing girl. "You probably mean the pale moon, or a poor dim little star."

"I know what I mean," answered the little old fellow in tones of mock indignation, "and I'll not allow a chit of a girl to correct my astronomy. I'm your schoolmaster, and if I say the sun comes after the day, why after the day it comes. Now, there!" he continued, as they entered the store. "Turn your face to the wall and do penance. Such insolence!"

The girl faced the wall, and after a moment she looked laughingly over her shoulder at him. "If you'll let me turn around, I'll admit that the sun comes at midnight, if you say it does, Billy Little."

"Midnight it is," said Billy, sternly. "Take your seat."

She ran laughing to Billy, and clasping his arm affectionately, said with a touch of seriousness: —

"It comes whenever you say it does, Billy Little. I'd believe you before I'd believe myself."

Poor old bachelor heart! Look to your breastworks; the enemy is at hand.

"Now I've noticed," said cynical Billy, "that whenever the feminine heart wants something, it grows tender. What do you want?"

"I want a letter, Billy Little. Father sent me down to fetch it, if there is one."

"Yes, there's one here," he answered, going back of the glass-covered pigeon-holes. "There's one here from Indianapolis. It's from your Uncle Jim Fisher. I suppose he's after your father again to sell his farm and invest the proceeds in the Indianapolis store. Precious fool he'll be if he does."

"Indeed, he would not be a fool," retorted the girl. "I'm just wild for father to move to Indianapolis. I don't want to grow up in the country like a ragweed or mullein stalk, and I —" ("Like a sweetbrier or a golden-rod," interrupted Billy) "and I don't want you to advise him not to go," she continued, unmindful of Billy's flowers of poesy.

"Well, here's the letter. Do you want anything else?"

"N-o-o-no."

"Then, for once, I've found a disinterested female in a coaxing mood," replied this modern Diogenes. He came from behind the counter, pretending to believe her, and started toward the door.

"How's Dic?" he asked. "I haven't seen him for a fortnight. I've been wondering what has become of him." The girl's face turned red — painfully so to Billy — as she replied: —

"I — I haven't seen him either for — for a very long time — three days." She stopped talking and Billy remained silent. After a long pause she spoke up briskly, as if she had just remembered something.

"Oh, I almost forgot — there *is* something I want, and

— and after all, you're right. I want — I want — won't you — will you — I say, Billy Little, won't you let me have a sheet of writing paper and a pot of ink, and won't you cut this pen for me?"

Billy took the quill and turned to go behind the counter. The girl was dancing nervously on her toes. "But say, Billy Little, I can't pay you for them now. Will — will — you trust me?"

Billy did not reply, but went to the letter-paper box.

"You had better take more than one sheet, Rita," he said softly. "If you're going to write a love-letter to Dic, you will be sure to spoil the first sheet, perhaps the second and third."

Billy's head blushed vividly after he had spoken, for his remark was a prying one. The girl had no thought of writing a love-letter, and she resented the insinuation. She was annoyed because she had betrayed her purpose in buying the paper. But she loved Billy Little too dearly to show her resentment, and remained silent. The girl, Billy, and Dic differing as much as it is possible for three persons to differ, save in their common love for books and truth, had been friends ever since her babyhood, and Billy was the only person to whom she could easily lay bare her heart. Upon second thought she concluded to tell him her trouble.

"It was this way, Billy Little," she began, and after stumbling over many words, she made a good start, and the little story of her troubles fell from her lips like crystal water from a babbling spring.

After her story was finished — and she found great relief in the telling — Billy said: —

"Of course I'll trust you. I'd trust you for the whole store if you wanted to buy it. I'd trust you with my soul," he added after a pause. "There's not a false drop of blood in your veins."

"Ah, Billy Little," she answered, as she took his hand caressingly for an instant, and her eyes, with their wonderful capacity for expression, said the rest.

"So, you see, I *do* want to write a letter to Dic," she said, dropping his hand; "but it is not to be a love-letter. I could not write one if I wished. I was very wicked. Oh, Billy Little, I honestly think, at times, I'm the worst girl that ever lived. Something terrible will happen to me for my wickedness, I'm sure. Mother says it will."

"Yes, something terrible — terrible, I'm sure," returned Billy, musingly.

"And I want to apologize to him," she continued, "and tell him I didn't mean it. Isn't it right that I should?"

"Oh, yes — yes," answered Billy, starting out of his revery. "Of course, yes — Maxwelton's braes are bonny — um — um — um — um — yes, oh yes."

When vexed, pleased, or puzzled, Billy was apt to hum the opening line of "Annie Laurie," though the first four words were all that received the honor of distinct articulation. The remainder of the stanza he allowed to die away under his breath. Rita was of course familiar with the habit, but this time she could not tell which motive had prompted the musical outburst. Billy himself couldn't have told, but perhaps the bachelor heart was at the bottom of it.

"Thank you, Billy Little, for the paper," said Rita. "I'll pay you with the first money I get." Billy silently helped her to mount her horse. She smiled, "Good-by," and he walked slowly back to the store muttering to himself: "Billy Little, Billy Little, your breastworks are weak, and you are a — Maxwelton's braes — um — um — um — um. — Ah, good evening, Mrs. Carson. Something I can do for you this evening? Sugar? Ah, yes, plenty. Best in town. Best shipment I ever had," and Billy was once more a merchant.

When Rita reached home supper was ready, and after the supper work was finished it was too dark to write; so the letter was postponed a day, and she took her place on the porch, hoping that Dic would come and that the letter might be postponed indefinitely. But he did not come. Next morning churning had again become loathsome, sweeping was hard work, and dinner was a barbarous institution. Rita had no appetite, and to sympathize with those who are hungry one must be hungry.

Innumerable very long minutes had woven themselves into mammoth hours when Rita, having no table in her room, found herself lying on the floor writing her momentous letter. It was not to be a love-letter; simply an appeal for forgiveness to a friend whom she had wantonly injured.

"Dear old Billy Little," she said to herself, when she opened the package. "What pretty paper — and he has given me six sheets in place of one — and a little pot of ink — and a sand-box! I wonder if the quill is a good one! Ah, two — three quills! Dear old Billy Little! Here is enough paper to last me for years." In that respect she was mistaken. She experienced difficulty with effort number one, but finished the letter and read it aloud; found it wholly unsatisfactory, and destroyed it. She used greater care with the next, but upon reading it over she found she had said too much of what she wished to leave unsaid, and too little of what she wanted to say. She destroyed number two with great haste and some irritation, for it was almost a love-letter. The same fate befell numbers three, four, and five. After all, Billy's liberal supply of paper would not last for years. If it proved sufficient for one day, she would be satisfied. Number six, right or wrong, must go to Dic, so she wrote simply and briefly what was in her heart.

"DEAR FRIEND DIC: My words were not intended for you. I was angry with Tom, as I had good reason to be, though he spoke the truth. I did put on my ribbon because I saw you coming, and I have cried every night since then because of what I said to you, and because you do not come to let me tell you how sorry I am. You should have given me a chance. I would have given you one. RITA."

It was a sweet, straightforward letter, half-womanly, half-childish, and she had no cause to be ashamed of it; but she feared it was bold, and tears came to her eyes when she read it, because there were no more sheets of paper, and modest or bold it must go to Dic.

Having written the letter, she had no means of sending it; but she had entered upon the venture, and was determined to carry it through. Mrs. Bays and her husband had driven to town, and there was no need for *ex post facto* resolutions. When the letter had been properly directed and duly sealed, the girl saddled her horse and started away on another journey to Sukey Yates. This time, however, she went somewhat out of her way, riding up the river path through the forest to Dic Bright's home. When she reached the barnyard gate Dic was hitching the horses to the "big wagon." He came at Rita's call, overjoyed at the sight of her. He knew she had come to ask forgiveness. For many months past he had tried not to see that she was unkind to him, but her words on the porch had convinced him, and he saw that her coldness had been intentional. Of course he did not know the cause of her altered demeanor, and had regretfully put it down to an altered sentiment on her part. But when he saw her at the barnyard gate, he was again in the dark as to her motive.

When Dic came up to her she handed him the letter

over the gate, saying: "Read it alone. Let no one see it."

Dic had only time to say, "Thank you," when the girl struck her horse and galloped down the forest path, bound for Sukey. When she had passed out of sight among the trees, Dic went down the river to a secluded spot, known as "The Stepoff," where he could read the letter without fear of detection. He had long suspected that his love for the girl was not altogether brotherly, and his recent trouble with her had crystallized that suspicion into certainty. But he saw nothing back of the letter but friendship and contrition. The girl's love was so great a treasure that he dared not even hope for it, and was more than satisfied with the Platonic affection so plainly set forth in her epistle. We who have looked into Rita's heart know of a thing or two that does not resemble Platonism; but the girl herself did not fully know what she felt, and Dic was sure she could not, under any circumstances, feel as he did. His mistake grew partly out of his lack of knowledge that woman's flesh and blood is of exactly the same quality that covers the bones and flows in the veins of man, and — well, Rita was Rita, and, in Dic's opinion, no other human being was ever of the quality of her flesh, or cast in the mould of her nature. The letter told him that he still held her warm, tender love as a friend. He was thankful for that, and would neither ask nor expect anything more.

If upon Rita's former visit to Sukey she had been too sad to enjoy the vivacious little maiden, upon this occasion she was too happy. She sat listening patiently to her chat, without hearing much of it, until Sukey said: —

"Dic was over to see me last night. I think he's so handsome, don't you?"

Rita was so startled that she did not think anything at the moment, and Sukey presently asked: —

"Don't you think he has a fine head? and his eyes are glorious. The gray is so dark, and they look right at you."

Rita, compelled to answer, said, "I think he is — is all right — strong."

"Indeed, he is strong," responded Sukey. "When he takes hold of you, you just feel like he could crush you. Oh, it's delicious — it's thrilling — when you feel that a man could just tear you to pieces if he wanted to."

"Why?" asked Rita; "I don't understand."

"Oh, just because," replied Sukey, shrugging her shoulders and laughing softly, her red lips parted, her little teeth glistening like wet ivory, and the dimples twinkling mischievously.

"Just because" explained nothing to Rita, but something in Sukey's laughter and manner aroused undefined and disagreeable suspicions, so she said: —

"Well, Sukey, I must be going home."

"Why, you just came," returned Sukey, still laughing softly. She had shot her arrow intentionally and had seen it strike the target's centre. Sukey was younger than Rita, but she knew many times a thing or two; while poor Rita's knowledge of those mystic numbers was represented by the figure 0.

Why should Dic "take hold" of any one, thought Rita, while riding home, and above all, why should he take hold of Sukey? Sukey was pretty, and Sukey's prettiness and Dic's "taking hold" seemed to be related in some mysterious manner. She who saw others through the clear lens of her own conscience did not doubt Dic and Sukey, but notwithstanding her trustfulness, a dim suspicion passed through her mind that something might be wrong if Dic had really "taken hold" of Sukey. Where the evil was, she could not determine; and to connect the straightforward, manly fellow with anything dishonorable

or wicked was impossible to her. So she dismissed the subject, and it left no trace upon her mind save a slight irritation against Sukey.

Rita felt sure that Dic would come to see Tom that evening, and the red ribbon was in evidence soon after supper. Dic did come, and there was at least one happy girl on Blue.

THE SYCAMORE DIVAN

CHAPTER III

The Sycamore Divan

A VIRGIN love in the heart of a young girl is like an effervescent chemical: it may withstand a great shock, but a single drop of an apparently harmless liquid may cause it to evaporate. This risk Dic took when he went that evening to see Tom; and the fact that Rita had written her letter, of which she had such grave misgivings, together with the words of Sukey Yates, made his risk doubly great. Poor Dic needed a thorough knowledge of chemistry. He did not know that he possessed it, but he was a pure-minded, manly man, and the knowledge was innate with him.

"Good evening, Rita," said Dic, when, after many efforts, she came out upon the porch where he was sitting with her father, her mother, and Tom.

"Good morning," answered Rita, confusedly, and her mistake as to the time of day added to her confusion.

"Good morning!" cried Tom. "It's evening. My! but she's confused because you're here, Dic."

Tom was possessed of a simian acuteness that had led him to discover poor Rita's secret before she herself was fully aware of its existence. She, however, was rapidly making the interesting discovery, and feared that between the ribbon, the letter, and Tom's amiable jokes, Dic would discover it and presume upon the fact. From the mingling of these doubts and fears grew a feeling of resentment against Dic — a conviction before the fact. She

wished him to know her regard for him, but she did not want him to learn it from any act of hers. She desired him to wrest it from her by main force, and as little awkwardness as a man may use. Had Dic by the smallest word or act shown a disposition to profit by what Rita feared had been excessive frankness in her letter, or had he, in any degree, assumed the attitude of a confident lover, such word or act would have furnished the needful chemical drop, and Dic's interests would have suffered. His safety at this time lay in ignorance. He did not suspect that Rita loved him, and there was no change in his open friendly demeanor. He was so easy, frank, and happy that evening that the girl soon began to feel that nothing unusual had happened, and that, after all, the letter was not bold, but perfectly right, and quite proper in all respects. Unconsciously to her Dic received the credit for her eased conscience, and she was grateful to him. She was more comfortable, and the evening seemed more like old times than for many months before.

Soon after Dic's arrival, Tom rode over to see Sukey Yates. As the hollyhock to the bees, so was Sukey to the country beaux — a conspicuous, inviting, easily reached little reservoir of very sweet honey. Later, Mr. and Mrs. Bays drove to town, leaving Dic and Rita to themselves, much to the girl's alarm, though she and Dic had been alone together many times before. Thus Dic had further opportunity to make a mistake; but he did not mention the letter, and the girl's confidence came slowly back to her.

The evening was balmy, and after a time Dic and Rita walked to the crest of the little slope that fell gently ten or fifteen feet to the water's edge. A sycamore log answered the purpose of a divan, and a great drooping elm furnished a royal canopy. A half-moon hung in the sky, whitening a few small clouds that seemed to be painted on the blue-black dome. The air, though not oppressive, was warm

enough to make all nature languorous, and the soft breath of the south wind was almost narcotic in its power to soothe. A great forest is never still; even its silence has a note of its own. The trees seem to whisper to each other in the rustling of their leaves. The birds, awakened by the wind or by the breaking of a twig, speak to their neighbors. The peevish catbird and the blue jay grumble, while the thrush, the dove, and the redbird peep caressingly to their mates, and again fall asleep with gurgles of contentment in their throats.

Rita and Dic sat by the river's edge for many minutes in silence. The ever wakeful whippoorwill piped his doleful cry from a tree across the water, an owl hooted from the blackness of the forest beyond the house, and the turtle-doves cooed plaintively to each other in their far-reaching, mournful tones, giving a minor note to the nocturnal concert. Now and then a fish sprang from the water and fell back with a splash, and the water itself kept up a soft babble like the notes of a living flute.

Certainly the time was ripe for a mistake, but Dic did not make one. A woman's favor comes in waves like the flowing of the sea; and a wise man, if he fails to catch one flood, will wait for another. Dic was unconsciously wise, for Rita's favor was at its ebb when she walked down to the river bank. Ebb tide was indicated by the fact that she sat as far as possible from him on the log. The first evidence of a returning flood-tide would be an unconscious movement on her part toward him. Should the movement come from him there might be no flood-tide.

During the first half-hour Dic did most of the talking, but he spoke only of a book he had borrowed from Billy Little. With man's usual tendency to talk a subject threadbare, he clung to the one topic. A few months prior to that time his observations on the book would have interested the girl; but recently two or three unusual

events had touched her life, and her dread that Dic would speak of them, was rapidly growing into a fear that he would not. By the end of that first half-hour, her feminine vivacity monopolized the conversation with an ostentatious display of trivial details on small subjects, and she began to move toward his end of the log. Still Dic kept his place, all unconscious of his wisdom.

Geese seemed to be Rita's favorite topic. Most women are clever at periphrasis, and will go a long way around to reach a desired topic, if for any reason they do not wish to approach it directly. The topics Rita wished to reach, as she edged toward Dic on the log and talked about geese, were her unkind words and her very kind letter. She wished to explain that her words were not meant to be unkind, and that the letter was not meant to be kind, and thought to reach the desired topics by the way of geese.

"Do you remember, Dic," she asked, "a long time ago, when Tom and I and the Yates children spent the afternoon at your house? We were sitting near the river, as we are sitting now, and a gray wolf ran down from the opposite bank and caught a gander?"

"Yes, I remember it as if it were yesterday," replied Dic.

"Geese are such fools when they are frightened," continued Rita, clinging to her subject.

"So are people," answered Dic. "We are all foolish when frightened. The other day the barn door slammed to with a crash, and I was so frightened I tried to put the collar in the horse's mouth." Rita laughed, and Dic continued, "Once I was in the woods hunting, and a bear rose up —"

"But geese are worse than anybody when disturbed," interrupted Rita, "worse even than you when the barn door slams. The other day I wanted to catch a goose to get a —"

"They are not worse than a lot of girls at gabbling," interrupted Dic, ungallantly retaliating for Rita's humorous thrust.

"They are not half so dull as a lot of men," she replied, tossing her head. "When men get together they hum and hum about politics and crops, till it makes one almost wish there were no government or crops. But geese are — the other day I wanted to catch one to get a — "

"All men don't hum and hum, as you say," returned Dic. "There's Billy Little — you don't think he hums, do you?"

"No," answered the girl; "Billy Little always says something when he talks, but he's always talking. I will put him against any man in the world for a talking match. But the other day I wanted to catch a goose to get a quill, and — "

"Oh, that reminds me," broke in Dic, "my Uncle Joe Bright is coming to visit us soon. Talk about talkers! He is a Seventh Day Adventist preacher, and his conversation — no, I'll say his talk, for that's all it is — reminds me of time."

"How is that?" queried Rita.

"It's made up of small particles, goes on forever, and is all seconds. He says nothing first hand. His talk is all borrowed."

Rita laughed and tried again. "Well, I wanted to catch — "

"You just spoke of a talking match," said Dic. "I have an idea. Let us bring Billy Little and my uncle together for a talking match."

"Very well," replied Rita, laughing heartily. "I'll stake my money on Billy Little. But I was saying, the other day I — "

"I'll put mine on Uncle Joe," cried Dic. "Billy Little is a 'still Bill' compared with him."

Rita was provoked, and I think with good reason; but after a pause she concluded to try once more.

"The other day I wanted a quill for a pen, and when I tried to catch a goose I thought their noise would alarm the whole settlement."

"Geese awakened Rome," said Dic. "If they should awaken Blue River, it, also, might become famous. The geese episode is the best known fact concerning the Eternal City — unless perhaps it is her howling."

"Rome had a right to howl," said Rita, anxious to show that she remembered his teaching. "She was founded by the children of a wolf."

Dic was pleased and laughingly replied: "That ponderous historical epigram is good enough to have come from Billy Little himself. When you learn a fact, it immediately grows luminous."

The girl looked quickly up to satisfy herself that he was in earnest. Being satisfied, she moved an inch or two nearer him on the log, and began again: —

"I wanted to catch the goose —" but she stopped and concluded to try the Billy Little road. "Dear old Billy Little," she said, "isn't he good? The other day he said he'd trust me for the whole store, if I wanted to buy it. I had no money and I wanted to buy —"

"Why should he not trust you for all you would buy?" asked Dic. "He knows he would get his money."

The Billy Little route also seemed hilly. She concluded to try another, and again made a slight movement toward Dic on the log.

"I went from your house this afternoon over to Sukey's." She looked stealthily at Dic, but he did not flinch. After a pause she continued, with a great show of carelessness and indifference, though this time she moved away from him as she spoke. "She said you had been over to see her last night." And to show that she was not at all in-

terested in his reply, she hummed the air of a song and carefully scrutinized a star that was coming dangerously close to the moon.

"Yes, I went over to borrow their adze. Ours is broken," returned Dic.

The song ceased. Star and moon might collide for all the singer cared. She was once again interested in things terrestrial.

"Now, Dic," she cried, again moving toward him and unduly emphasizing the fact that she was merely teasing (she talked to tease, but listened to learn), "now, Dic, you know the adze was only an excuse. You went to see Sukey. You know you did. Why didn't you borrow Kaster's adze? They live much nearer your house." She thought she had him in a trap, and laughed as if she were delighted.

"I went to Kaster's first. They had none."

The girl concluded she was on the wrong road. But the side road had suddenly become interesting, and she determined to travel it a short way. Silence ensued on Dic's part, and travel on the side road became slow. Rita was beginning to want to gallop. If she continued on the side road, she feared her motive might grow to look more like a desire to learn than a desire to tease; but she summoned her boldness, and with a laugh that was intended to be merry, said: —

"Dic, you know you went to see Sukey, and that you spent the evening with her."

"Did she say I did?" he asked, turning sharply upon her.

"Well —" replied Rita, but she did not continue. The Sukey Yates road *was* interesting, unusually so.

Dic paused for an answer, but receiving none, continued with emphasis: —

"I did not go into the house. I wasn't there five minutes, and I didn't say ten words to Sukey."

"You need not get mad about it," replied the girl. "I don't care how often you go to see Sukey or any other girl."

"I know you don't," he returned. "Of course you don't care. I never hoped — never even dreamed — that you would," and his breath came quickly with his bold, bold words.

"You might as well begin to dream," thought the girl, but she laughed, this time nervously, and said, "She told me you were there and took — took hold of — that is, she said you were so strong that when you took hold of her she felt that you could crush her." Then forgetting herself for a moment, she moved quite close to Dic and asked, "*Did* you take — take —" but she stopped.

"Tell me, Rita," returned Dic, with a sharpness that attracted her attention at once, "did she say I took hold of her, or are you trying to tease me? If you are teasing, I think it is in bad taste. If she said —"

"Well," interrupted the girl, slightly frightened, "she said that when you take hold of one —"

"Oh, she did not say herself?" asked Dick.

"I don't see that she could have meant any one else," replied Rita. "But, dear me, I don't care how often you take hold of her; you need not get angry at me because you took hold of her. There can be no harm in taking hold of any one, I'm sure, if you choose to do so; but why one should do it, I don't know, and I'm sure I don't care."

No *ex post facto* resolution could cure that lie, though of course it is a privileged one to a girl.

Dic made no reply, save to remark: "I'll see Miss Sukey to-morrow. If I wanted to 'take hold' of her, as she calls it, I would do so, but — but I'll see her to-morrow."

The answer startled Rita. She did not want to be known as a tale-bearer. Especially did she object in this particular case; therefore she said: —

"You may see her if you wish, but you shall not speak to her of what I have told you. She would think — "

"Let her think what she chooses," he replied. "I have never 'taken hold' of her in my life. Lord knows, I might if I wanted to. All the other boys boast that they take turn about, but —. She would be a fool to tell if it were true, and a story-teller if not. So I'll settle the question to-morrow, and for all time."

A deal of trouble might have been saved had Rita permitted him to make the settlement with Sukey, but she did not. The infinite potency of little things is one of the paradoxes of life.

"No, you shall not speak of this matter to her," she said, moving close to him upon the log and putting her hand upon his arm coaxingly. "Promise me you will not."

He would have promised to stop breathing had she asked it in that mood. It was the first he had ever seen of it, and he was pleased, although, owing to an opaqueness of mind due to his condition, it told him nothing save that his old-time friend was back again.

"If you tell her," continued the girl, "she will be angry with me, and I have had so much trouble of late I can't bear any more."

At last she was on the straight road bowling along like a mail coach. "After I spoke to you as I did the other night — you know, when Tom — I could not eat or sleep. Oh, I was in so much trouble! You and I had always been such real friends, and you have always been so good to me — " a rare little lump was rapidly and alarmingly growing in her throat — "I have never had even an unkind look from you, and to speak to you as I did, — oh, Dic, — " the lump grew too large for easy utterance, and she stopped speaking. Dic was wise in not pursuing the ebb, but he was foolish in not catching the flood. But

perhaps if he would wait, it might ingulf him of its own accord, and then, ah, then, the sweetness of it!

"Never think of it again," he said soothingly. "Your words hurt me at the time, but your kind, frank letter cured the pain, and I intended never to speak of it. But since you have spoken, I — I — "

The girl was frightened, although eager to hear what he would say, so she remained silent during Dic's long pause, and at length he said, "I thank you for the letter."

A sigh of mingled relief and disappointment came from her breast.

"It gave me great pleasure, for it made me know that you were still my friend," said Dic, "and that your words were meant for Tom, and not for me."

"Indeed, not for you," said Rita, still struggling with the lump in her throat.

"Let us never speak of it again," said Dic. "I'm glad it happened. It puts our friendship on a firmer basis than ever before."

"That would be rather hard to do, wouldn't it?" asked the girl, laughing contentedly. "We have been such good friends ever since I was a baby — since before I can remember."

The direct road was becoming too smooth for Rita, and she began to fear she would not be able to stop.

"Let us make this bargain," said Dic. "When you want to say anything unkind, say it to me. I'll not misunderstand."

"Very well," she replied laughingly, "the privilege may be a great comfort to me at times. I, of course, dare not scold mother. If I look cross at Tom, mother scolds me for a week, and I could not speak unkindly to poor father. You see, I have no one to scold, and I'm sure every one should have somebody to explode upon

with impunity now and then. So I'll accept your offer, and you may expect — " There was a brief pause, after which she continued : " No, I'll not. Never again so long as I live. You, of all others, shall be safe from my ill temper," and she gave him her hand in confirmation of her words.

In all the world there was no breast freer from ill temper than hers ; no heart more gentle, tender, and trustful. Her nature was like a burning spring. It was pure, cool, and limpid to its greatest depths, though there was fire in it.

Dic did not consider himself obliged to release Rita's hand at once, and as she evidently thought it would be impolite to withdraw it, there is no telling what mistakes might have happened had not Tom appeared upon the scene.

Tom seated himself beside Dic just as that young man dropped Rita's hand, and just as the young lady moved a little way toward her end of the log.

" You are home early," remarked Rita.

" Yes," responded Tom, " Doug Hill was there — the lubberly pumpkin-head."

No man of honor would remain in a young lady's parlor if at the time of his arrival she had another gentleman visitor unless upon the request of the young lady, and no insult so deep and deadly could be offered to the man in possession as the proffer of such a request by the young lady to the intruder.

After a few minutes of silence Tom remarked : " This night reminds me of the night I come from Cincinnati to Brookville on the canal-boat. Everything's so warm and clear like. I set out on top of the boat and seed the hills go by."

" Did the hills go by ? " asked Rita, who had heard the story of Tom's Cincinnati trip many times.

"Well, they seemed to go by," answered Tom. "Of course, they didn't move. It was the boat. But I jest seed them move as plain as I see that cloud up yonder."

That Tom had not profited by Billy Little's training and his mother's mild corrections now and then (for the Chief Justice had never entirely lost the habits of better days), was easily discernible in his speech. Rita's English, like Dic's and Billy Little's, was corrupted in spots by evil communication; but Tom's — well, Tom was no small part of the evil communication itself.

Dic had heard the Cincinnati story many times, and when he saw symptoms of its recurrence, he rose and said: —

"Well, Tom, if you *seed* the hills go by, you'll *seed* me go by if you watch, for I'm going home," and with a good night he started up the river path, leaving Rita and her brother Tom seated on the log.

"So Doug Hill was there?" asked Rita.

"Yes," responded Tom; "and how any girl can let him kiss her, I don't know. His big yaller face reminds me of the under side of a mud-turtle."

"I hope Sukey doesn't allow him nor any one else to kiss her," cried Rita, with a touch of indignant remonstrance. Tom laughed as if to say that he could name at least one who enjoyed that pleasant privilege.

Rita was at that time only sixteen years old, and had many things to learn about the doings of her neighbors, which one would wish she might never know. The Chief Justice had at least one virtue: she knew how to protect her daughter. No young man had ever been permitted to "keep company" with Rita, and she and her mother wanted none. Dic, of course, had for years been a constant visitor; but he, as you know, was like one of the family. Aside from the habit of Dic's visits, and growing out of them, Madam Bays had dim outlines of a future purpose. Dic's father, who was dead, had been considered well-to-do among

his neighbors. He had died seized of four "eighties," all paid for, and two-thirds cleared for cultivation. Eighty acres of cleared bottom land was looked upon as a fair farm. One might own a thousand acres of rich soil covered with as fine oak, walnut, and poplar as the world could produce and might still be a poor man, though the timber in these latter days would bring a fortune. Cleared land was wealth at the time of which I write, and in building their houses the settlers used woods from which nowadays furniture is made for royal palaces. Every man on Blue might have said with Louis XIV, "I am housed like a king." Cleared land was wealth, and Dic, upon his mother's death, would at least be well able to support a wife. The Chief Justice knew but one cause for tenderness — Tom. When Rita was passing into womanhood, and developing a beauty that could not be matched on all the River Blue, she began to assume a commercial value in her mother's eyes that might, Madam B. thought in a dimly conscious fashion, be turned to Tom's account. Should Rita marry a rich man, there would be no injustice — justice, you know, was the watchword — in leaving all the Bays estate to the issue male. Therefore, although Mrs. Bays was not at all ready for her young daughter to receive attention from any man, when the proper time should come, Dic might be available if no one better offered, and Tom, dear, sweet, Sir Thomas de Triflin', should then have all that his father and mother possessed, as soon as they could with decent self-respect die and get out of his way.

As time passed, and Rita's beauty grew apace, Mrs. Bays began to feel that Dic with his four "eighties" was not a price commensurate with the winsome girl. But having no one else in mind, she permitted his visits with a full knowledge of their purpose, and hoped that chance or her confidential friend, Providence, might bring a nobler prize

within range of the truly great attractiveness of Tom's sister.

Mrs. Bays knew that the life she and her neighbors were leading was poor and crude. She also knew that men of wealth and position were eagerly seeking rare girls of Rita's type. By brooding over better things than Dic could offer, her hope grew into a strong desire, and with Rita's increasing beauty this motherly desire took the form of faith. Still, Dic's visits were permitted to continue, and doubtless would be permitted so long as they should be made ostensibly to the family.

Tom's remarks upon Sukey and Sukey's observations concerning Dic had opened Rita's eyes to certain methods prevalent among laddies and lasses, and as a result Sukey, for the time, became *persona non grata* to her old-time friend. Rita was not at the time capable of active jealousy. She knew Sukey was pretty enough, and, she feared, bold enough to be dangerous in the matter of Dic, but she trusted him. Sukey certainly was prettily bedecked with the pinkest and whitest of cheeks, twinkling dimples, and sparkling eyes; but for real beauty she was not in Rita's class, and few men would think of her fleshly charms twice when they might be thinking of our little heroine.

Thus Tom and Sukey became fountain-heads of unhallowed knowledge upon subjects concerning which every young girl, however pure, has a consuming curiosity.

Rita had heard of the "kissing games" played by the youngsters, and a few of the oldsters, too, at country frolics, corn-huskings, and church socials; but as I have told you, the level-headed old Chief Justice had wisely kept her daughter away from such gatherings, and Rita knew little of the kissing, and never telling what was going on about her. Tom and Sukey had thrown light upon the subject for her, and she soon understood, feared, and abhorred. Would she ever pity and embrace?

THE DEBUTANTE

CHAPTER IV

The Debutante

A YEAR after the small happenings I have just related, great events began to cluster about Dic. They were truly great for him and of course were great for Rita.

Through Billy Little's aid Dic received an offer from an eastern horse buyer to lead a drove of horses to New York. The task was difficult, and required a man of health, strength, judgment, and nerve. The trip going would require two months, and the horses must be kept together, fed, cared for, and, above all, protected night and day from horse thieves, until after the Alleghanies were crossed. The horses were driven loose in herds of one hundred or more. Three men constituted a crew. In this instance Dic was to be in charge, and two rough horse-boys would be his assistants. It would have been impossible to *drive* the horses over the fenceless roads and through the leagues of trackless forest; therefore, they were led. The men would take turns about riding in advance, and the man leading would continually whistle a single shrill note which the horses soon learned to follow. Should the whistling cease for a moment, the horses would stop and perhaps stampede. This might mean forty-eight hours of constant work in gathering the drove, with perhaps the loss of one or more. If you will, for one hour, whistle a shrill note loud enough to reach the ears of a herd of trampling, neighing horses, you will discover

that even that task, which is the smallest part of horse "leading," is an exhausting operation.

The work was hard, but the pay was good, and Dic was delighted with the opportunity. One of its greatest attractions to him was the fact that he would see something of the world. Billy Little urged him to accept the offer.

"A man," said he, "estimates his own stature by comparing it with those about him, and the most fatal mistake he can make is to underestimate his size. Self-conceit is ugly, but it never injured any one. Modesty would have ruined Napoleon himself. The measure of a man, like the length of a cloth-yard, depends upon the standard. Go away from here, Dic. Find your true standard. Measure yourself and return, if you wish. This place is as good as another, if a man knows himself; if he doesn't, he is apt to be deceived by the littleness of things about him. Yet there are great things here, too — greater, in some respects, than any to be found in New York; but the great things here are possibilities. Of course, possibilities are but the raw material. They must be manufactured — achieved. But achievement, my boy, achievement! that's the whole thing, after all. What would Cæsar Germanicus and Napoleon have been without possibilities? A ready-made opportunity is a good thing in its way, but it is the creation of opportunity out of crude possibilities that really marks and makes the man and stamps the deed. Any hungry fool would seize the opportunity to eat who might starve if he had to make his bread. Go out into the world. You have good eyes. It will not take long to open them. When they are opened, come back and you will see opportunities here that will make you glad you are alive."

"But, Billy Little," replied Dic, who was sitting with Rita on the sycamore divan, while their small elderly friend sat upon the grass facing them, "you certainly

have seen the world. Your eyes were opened before you came here, and it seems to me your learning and culture are buried here among the possibilities you speak of."

"No, Dic," answered Billy, "you see, I — well, I ran away from — from many things. You see, you and I are cast in different moulds. You are six feet tall, physically and temperamentally." Rita thought Billy was the most acute observer in Christendom, but she did not speak, save with her eyes. Those eyes nowadays were always talking.

"Six feet don't amount to much," responded Dic. "There is Doug Hill, who is six feet three, with no more brains than a catfish. It is what's at the top of the six feet that counts. You have more at the top of your five feet four than the tallest man on Blue, and as I said, you seem to be buried here. Where are the possibilities for you, Billy Little? And if you can't achieve something great — poor me!"

"There are different possibilities for different men. I think, for example, I have achieved something in you. What say you, Rita?"

The girl was taken unawares. "Indeed you have, glorious — splendid — that is, I mean you have achieved something great in all of us whom you have tried to influence. I see your possibilities, Billy Little. I see them stamped upon the entire Blue River settlement. La Salle and Marquette, of whom Dic read to me from your book, had the same sort of opportunities. Their field was broader, but I doubt if their influence will be more lasting than yours."

"Rather more conspicuous," laughed Billy.

"Yes," answered Rita, "your achievements will not be recorded. Their effect will probably be felt by all of us, and the achievement must be your only reward."

"It is all I ask," returned Billy. Then, after a pause,

he spoke in mock reproof to Dic, "Now, hang your head in shame."

"I suppose it's my turn," Dic replied.

"The achievements of picturesque men only should be placarded to the world," said Billy. "The less said about a little old knot like me the better for — better for the knot."

"You are not a knot," cried Rita indignantly.

"Rita," said Dic, "you know the walnut knot, while it shows the roughest bark, has the finest grain in the tree."

"I am going home if you don't stop that sort of talking," said Billy, pleased to his toes, but pretending to be annoyed.

A fortnight before Dic's intended departure for New York an opportunity presented itself of which the young man, after due consideration, determined to take advantage. He walked over one evening to see Tom, but, as usual, found Rita. After a few minutes in which to work his courage up, he said: —

"There is to be a church social at Scott's to-morrow night — the Baptists. I wonder if you would like — that is, would want to — would be willing to go with me?"

"I would be glad to go," answered the girl; "but mother won't let me."

"We'll go in and ask her, if you wish," he replied.

"There's no use, but we can try. Perhaps if she thinks I don't want to go, she will consent."

Into the house they went, and Dic made his wants known to the head of the family.

"No," snapped the good lady, "she can't go. Girls of sixteen and seventeen nowadays think they are young ladies."

"They are dull, anyway," said Rita, referring to church socials. "I have heard they are particularly dull at Scott's — the Baptists are so religious. Sukey Yates said they did nothing but preach and pray and sing psalms and

take up a collection at the last social Scott gave. It's just like church, and I don't want to go anyway." She had never been to a church social, but from what she had heard she believed them to be bacchanalian scenes of riotous enjoyment, and her remarks were intended to deceive.

"You should not speak so disrespectfully of the church," said the Chief Justice, sternly. "The Lord will punish you for it, see if He doesn't. Since I think about it, the socials held at Scott's are true, religious, God-fearing gatherings, and you shall go as a punishment for your sacrilegious sneers. Perhaps if you listen to the Word, it may come back after many days." Margarita, Sr., often got her Biblical metaphors mixed, but that troubled her little. There was, she thought, virtue in scriptural quotations, even though entirely inapplicable to the case in point.

"Come for her to-morrow evening, Dic," said Mrs. B. "She shall be ready." Then turning to Rita: "To speak of the Holy Word in that manner! You shall be punished."

Dic and Rita went out to the porch. Dic laughed, but the girl saw nothing funny.

"It seems to me just as if I had told a story," she said. "One may act a story as easily as tell it."

"Well, you are to be punished," laughed Dic.

"But you know I want to go. I have never been to a social, and it will not punish me to go."

"Then you are to be punished by going with me," returned the stalwart young fisherman. She looked up to him with a flash of her eyes — those eyes were worse than a loose tongue for tattling — and said: —

"That is true."

Dic, who was fairly boiling with pleasant anticipations, went to town next day and boiled over on Billy Little.

"I'm going to take Rita to Scott's social this evening," he said.

"Ah, indeed," responded Billy; "it's her first time out, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I envy her, by George, I do, and I envy you," said Billy. He did not envy Dic; but you may remember my remarks concerning bachelor hearts and their unprotected condition in this cruel world. There may be pain of the sort Billy felt without either envy or jealousy.

"Dic, I have a mind to send Rita a nice ribbon or two for to-night. What do you think about it?" asked Billy.

"She would be delighted," answered Dic. "She would accept them from you, but not from me."

"There is no flattery in that remark," answered Billy, with a touch of sharpness.

"Why, Billy Little, what do you suppose I meant?" asked Dic.

"I know you spoke the truth. She would accept a present from the little old knot, but would refuse it from the straight young tree."

"Why, Billy Little, I meant nothing of the sort."

"Now, not another word," interrupted Billy. "Give these ribbons to her when you ride home, and tell her the knot sends them to the sweetbrier." Then turning his face to the shelves on the wall, and arranging a few pieces of goods, he hummed under his breath his favorite stanza, "Maxwelton's braes," and paid no further attention to his guest.

Rita came out as Dic rode up to the gate. He did not dismount, but handed her the ribbons across the fence, saying: "Billy Little sends you these for to-night. He said they were from the knot to the sweetbrier."

The girl's suppressed delight had been troubling her all day. Her first party, her first escort, and that escort Dic! What more could a girl desire? The ribbons were too much. And somebody was almost ready to weep for joy.

She opened the little package and her eyes sparkled. When she felt that speech was entirely safe, she said: —

"The little package is as prim and neat as Billy Little himself. Dear, sweet, old Billy Little."

Dic, whose heart was painfully inflamed, was almost jealous of Billy, and said: —

"I suppose you would not have accepted them from me?"

"Why not?" she responded. "Of course I would." Her eyes grew wide when she looked up to him and continued, "Did you get them for me and tell me that Billy Little sent them?"

"No," answered Dic, regretfully, as he began to see possibilities, even on Blue. One possibility, at least, he saw clearly — one that he had lost.

"It was more than a possibility," he said to himself, as he rode homeward. "It was a ready-made opportunity, and I did not see it. The sooner I go to New York or some place else and get my eyes opened, the better it will be for me."

The church social opened with a long, sonorous prayer by the Baptist preacher, Mr. Wetmore. Then followed a psalm, which in turn was followed by a "few words." After the few words, Rev. Wetmore said in soft, conciliatory tones, "Now, brethren, if Deacon Moore will be so kind as to pass the hat, we will receive the offering."

Wetmore was not an ordained minister, nor was he recognized by the church to which he claimed to belong. He was one of the many itinerant vagabonds who foisted themselves upon isolated communities solely for the sake of the "offering."

Deacon Moore passed his hat, and when he handed it to Wetmore that worthy soul counted out two large copper pennies. There were also in the hat two brass buttons

which Tom, much to Sukey's amusement, had torn from his clothing for the purpose of an offering. Sukey laughed so inordinately at Tom's extravagant philanthropy that she convinced De Triflin' he was a very funny fellow indeed; but she brought upon her pretty flaxen head a reprimand from Wetmore.

"Undue levity," said he, "ill becomes even frivolous youth at this moment. Later you will have ample opportunity to indulge your mirth; but for the present, the Lord's business—" at the word "business" he received the hat from Deacon Moore, and looked eagerly into it for the offering. Disappointment, quite naturally, spread itself over his sallow face, and he continued: "Buttons do not constitute an acceptable offering to the Lord. He can have no use for them. I think that during the course of my life work in the vineyard I have received a million buttons of which I — I mean the Lord — can have no possible use. If these buttons had been dollars or shillings, or even pennies, think of the blessings they would have brought from above."

The reverend man spoke several times with excusable asperity of "buttons," and after another psalm and a sounding benediction the religious exercises were finished, and the real business of the evening, the spelling-bee and the kissing games, began.

At these socials many of the old folks took part in the spelling-bee, after which they usually went home — an event eagerly awaited by the young people.

There was but one incident in the spelling-bee that touched our friends, and I shall pass briefly over that part of the entertainment preceding it. The class, ranging in years from those who lisped in youth to those who lisped in age, stood in line against the wall, and Wetmore, spelling-book in hand, stood in front of them to "give out" the words. It was not considered fair to give out a word not

in the spelling-book until the spelling and "syllabling" of sentences was commenced. All words were syllabled, but to spell and syllable a sentence was not an easy task, and by the time sentences were reached the class usually had dwindled down to three or four of the best spellers. Of course, one who missed a word left the class. Our friends — Billy Little, Dic, Rita, and Sukey Yates — were in the contest.

The first word given out was metropolitan, and it fell to Douglas of the Hill. He began: "M-e-t — there's your met; r-o — there's your ro; there's your metro; p-o-l — there's your pol; there's your ro-pol; there's your met-ro-pol; i — there's your i; there's your pol-i; there's your ro-pol-i; there's your met-ro-pol-i; t-e-n — there's your — " "t-a-n," cried the girl next to him, who happened to be Sukey Yates, and Douglas stepped down and out.

A score or more of words were then spelled without an error, until Constantinople fell to the lot of an elderly man who stood by Rita. He began: "C-o-n — there's your Con; s-t-a-n — there's your stan; there's your Con-stan; t-i — there's your ti; there's your stan-ti; there's your Con-stan-ti; n-o — there's your no; there's your ti-no; there's your stan-ti-no; there's your Con-stan-ti-no; p-e-l — there's your pell; there's your no— " — "p-l-e — there's your pell" (so pronounced); "there's your Con-stan-ti-no-ple," chimed Rita, and her elderly neighbor took a chair. Others of the class dropped out, leaving only our four acquaintances, — Dic, Billy, Sukey, and Rita. Dic went out on "a" in place of "i" in collectible, Sukey turning him down. Rita had hoped he would win the contest and had determined, should it narrow down to herself and him, to miss intentionally, if need be. After Dic had taken a chair, judgment fell to and upon Sukey. She began "j-u-d-g-e — there's your judge;" whereupon Billy Little said, "Sink the e," and Sukey sank, leaving Billy Little and Rita standing against the wall, as if they were about

to be married. Billy, of course, was only awaiting a good opportunity to fail in order that the laurels of victory might rest upon Rita's brow.

"We will now spell and syllable a few sentences," said Wetmore. "Mr. Little, I give you the sentence, 'An abominable bumblebee with his tail cut off.'"

It must be remembered that in spelling these words and sentences each syllable was pronounced separately and roundly. B-o-m was a full grown, sonorous bom. B-u-m was a rolling bum, and b-l-e was pronounced bell with a strong, full, ringing, liquid sound. The following italics show the emphasis. Billy slowly repeated the sentence and began: —

"A-n — there's your an; a — there's your a; there's your an-a; b-o-m — there's your *bom;* there's your *a*-bom; there's your *an*-a-*bom;* i — there's your i; there's your *bom*-i; there's your *a*-bom-i; there's your *an*-a-bom-i; n-a — there's your na; there's your *i*-na; there's your *bom*-i-na; there's your *a*-bom-i-*na;* there's your *an*-a-*bom*-i-*na;* b-l-e — there's your bell; there's your *na*-bell; there's your *i*-na-bell; there's your *bom*-i-*na*-bell; there's your *a*-bom-i-*na*-bell; there's your *an*-a-*bom*-i-*na*-bell; b-u-m — there's your bum; there's your *bell*-bum; there's your *na*-bell-bum; there's your *i*-na-*bell*-bum; there's your *bom*-i-*na*-bell-*bum;* there's your *a*-bom-i-*na*-*bell*-*bum;* there's your *an*-a-*bom*-i-*na*-bell-*bum;* b-l-e — there's your bell; there's your *bum*-bell; there's your *bell*-bum-*bell;* there's your *na*-bell-*bum*-bell; there's your *i*-na-bell-*bum*-bell; there's your *bom*-i-*na*-bell-*bum*-bell; there's your *a*-bom-i-*na*-bell-*bum*-bell; there's your *an*-a-*bom*-i-*na*-bell-*bum*-bell; b-e-e — there's your bee; there's your *bell*-bee; there's your *bum*-bell-bee; there's your *bell*-bum-*bell*-bee; there's your *na*-bell-*bum*-*bell*-bee; there's your *i*-na-bell-*bum*-bell-bee; there's your *bom*-i-na-*bell*-*bum*-bell-bee; there's your *a*-bom-i-*na*-bell-*bum*-bell-bee; there's your *an*-a-bom-i-*na*-

bell-*bum-bell*-bee; w-i-t-h — h-i-s — there's your with-his; there's your *bee*-with-his; there's your *bell*-bee-with-his; there's your *bum*-bell-bee-with-his; there's your *bell*-bum-*bell*-bee-with-his; there's your *na*-bell-*bum*-bell-bee-with-his; there's your *i*-na-*bell-bum*-bell-*bee*-with-his; there's your *bom*-i-*na*-bell-*bum*-bell-bee-with-his; there's your *a-bom*-i-na-*bell-bum*-bell-bee-with-his; there's your *an*-a-*bom*-i-*na*-bell-*bum*-bell-bee-with-his; t-a-l-e — there's your — " But Rita chimed in at once: "T-a-i-l — there's your tail; there's your *with*-his-tail: there's your *bee*-with-his-tail; there's your *bell*-bee-with-his-*tail;* there's your *bum*-bell-bee-with-his-tail; there's your *bell*-bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail; there's your *na*-bell-*bum*-bell-bee-with-his-tail; there's your *i*-na-*bell*-bum-*bell*-bee-with-his-tail; there's your *bom*-i-na-*bell*-bum-*bell*-bee-with-his-tail; there's your *a*-bom-i-*na*-bell-*bum*-bell-bee-with-his-tail; there's your *an*-a-*bom*-i-*na*-bell-*bum*-bell-bee-with-his-tail; c-u-t — there's your cut; there's your *tail*-cut; there's your *with*-his-tail-cut; there's your *bee*-with-his-tail-cut; there's your *bell*-bee-with-his-tail-cut; there's your *bum-bell*-bee-with-his-tail-cut; there's your *bell*-bum-*bell*-bee-with-his-tail-cut; there's your *na*-bell-*bum*-bell-bee-with-his-tail-cut; there's your *i*-na-*bell-bum*-bell-bee-with-his-*tail*-cut; there's your *bom*-i-*na*-bell-*bum*-bell-*bee*-with-his-*tail*-cut; there's your *a*-bom-i-*na-bell*-bum-*bell*-bee-with-his-tail-*cut;* there's your *an*-a-*bom*-i-*na*-bell-*bum-bell*-bee-with-his-tail-cut; o-f-f — there's your off; there's your *cut*-off; there's your *tail*-cut-off; there's your *with-his*-tail-cut-off; there's your *bee*-with-his-tail-cut-off; there's your *bell*-bee-with-his-tail-cut-off; there's your *bum-bell*-bee-with-his-tail-cut-off; there's your *bell*-bum-*bell*-bee-with-his-tail-cut-off; there's your *na*-bell-*bum*-bell-bee-with-his-tail-cut-off; there's your *i*-na-*bell*-bum-*bell*-bee-with-his-tail-cut-off; there's your *bom*-i-*na*-bell-*bum*-bell-*bee*-with-his-tail-cut-off; there's your *a*-bom-i-*na*-bell-*bum*-bell-bee-with-his-tail-cut-off; there's your *an*-a-*bom*-i-*na*-bell-*bum*-bell-bee-with-

his-tail-cut-*off*," and Rita took her seat, filled with triumph, save for the one regret that Dic had not won.

Many of the old folks, including Billy Little, departed when the bee closed, and a general clamor went up for the kissing games to begin.

Rita declined to take part in the kissing games, and sat against the wall with several other young ladies who had no partners. To Dic she gave the candid reason that she did not want to play, and he was glad.

Doug Hill, who, in common with every other young man on the premises, ardently desired Rita's presence in the game, said: —

"Oh, come in, Rita. Don't be so stuck up. It won't hurt you to be kissed." Doug was a bold, devil-may-care youth, who spoke his mind freely upon all occasions. He was of enormous size, and gloried in the fact that he was the neighborhood bully and very, very "tough." Doug would have you know that Doug would drink; Doug would gamble; Doug would fight. He tried to create the impression that he was very bad indeed, and succeeded. He would go to town Saturdays, "fill up," as he called getting drunk, and would ride furiously miles out of his way going home that he might pass the houses of his many lady-loves, and show them by yells and oaths what a rollicking blade he was. The reputation thus acquired won him many a smile; for, deplore the fact as we may, there's a drop of savage blood still alive in the feminine heart that does not despise depravity in man as it really should.

"Come into the game," cried Doug, taking Rita by the arm, and dragging her toward the centre of the room.

"I don't want to play," cried the girl. "Please let loose of my arms; you hurt me," but Doug continued to drag her toward the ring of players that was forming, and she continued to resist. Doug persisted, and after a moment

of struggling she called out, "Dic, Dic!" She had been accustomed since childhood to call upon that name in time of trouble, and had always found help. Dic would not have interfered had not Rita called, but when she did he responded at once.

"Let her alone, Hill," said Dic, as pleasantly as possible under the circumstances. "If she doesn't want to play, she doesn't have to."

"You go to—" cried Doug. "Maybe you think you can run over me, you stuck-up Mr. Proper."

"I don't want to do anything of the sort," answered Dic; "but if you don't let loose of Rita's arm, I'll—"

"What will you do?" asked Doug, laughing uproariously.

For a moment Dic allowed himself to grow angry, and said, "I'll knock that pumpkin off your shoulders," but at once regretted his words.

Doug thought Dic's remark very funny, and intimated as much. Then he bowed his head in front of our hero and said, "Here is the pumpkin; hit it if you dare."

Dic restrained an ardent desire, and Doug still with bowed head continued, "I'll give you a shillin' if you'll hit it, and if you don't, I'll break your stuck-up face."

Dic did not accept the shilling, which was not actually tendered in lawful coin, but stepped back from Doug that he might be prepared for the attack he expected. After waiting what he considered to be a reasonable time for Dic to accept his offer, Doug started toward our hero, looking very ugly and savage. Dic was strong and brave, but he seemed small beside his bulky antagonist, and Rita, frightened out of all sense of propriety, ran to her champion, and placing her back against his breast, faced Doug with fear and trembling. The girl was not tall enough by many inches to protect Dic's face from the breaking Doug had threatened; but what she lacked in height

she made up in terror, and she looked so "skeert," as Doug afterwards said, that he turned upon his heel with the remark: —

"That's all right. I was only joking. We don't want no fight at a church social, do we, Dic?"

"I don't particularly want to fight any place," replied Dic, glad that the ugly situation had taken a pleasant turn.

"Reckon you don't," returned Doug, uproariously, and the game proceeded.

Partly from disinclination, and partly because he wanted to talk to Rita, Dic did not at first enter the game, but during an intermission Sukey whispered to him: —

"We are going to play Drop the Handkerchief, and if you'll come in I'll drop it behind you every time, and — " here the whispers became very low and soft, "I'll let you catch me, too. We'll make pumpkin-head sick."

The game of skill known as "Drop the Handkerchief" was played in this fashion: a circle of boys and girls was formed in the centre of the room, each person facing the centre. One of the number was chosen "It." "It's" function was to walk or run around the circle and drop the handkerchief behind the chosen one. If "It" happened to be a young man, the chosen one, of course, was a young woman who immediately started in pursuit. If she caught the young man before he could run around the circle to the place she had vacated, he must deposit a forfeit, to be redeemed later in the evening. In any case she became the next "It." A young lady "It" of course dropped the handkerchief behind a young man, and equally, of course, started with a scream of frightened modesty around the circle of players, endeavoring to reach, if possible, the place of sanctuary left vacant by the young man. He started in pursuit, and if he caught her — there we draw the veil. If the young lady were anxious to escape, it was often possible for her to do so. But thanks to Providence,

all hearts were not so obdurate as Rita's. I would say, however, in palliation of the infrequency of escapes, that it was looked upon as a serious affront for a young lady to run too rapidly. In case she were caught and refused to pay the forfeit, her act was one of deadly insult gratuitously offered in full view of friends and acquaintances.

Dic hesitated to accept Sukey's invitation, though, in truth, it would have been inviting to any man of spirit. Please do not understand me to say that Dic was a second Joseph, nor that he was one who would run away from a game of any sort because a pretty Miss Potiphar or two happened to be of the charmed and charming circle.

He had often been in the games, and no one had ever impugned his spirit of gallantry by accusing him of unseemly neglect of the beautiful Misses P. His absence from this particular game was largely due to the fact that the right Miss Potiphar was sitting against the wall.

A flush came to Rita's cheek, and she moved uneasily when she saw Sukey whispering to Dic; but he did not suspect that Rita cared a straw what Sukey said. Neither did it occur to him that Rita would wish him to remain out of the game. He could, if he entered the game, make Doug Hill "sick," as Sukey had suggested, and that was a consummation devoutly to be wished. He did not wish to subject himself to the charge of ungallantry; and Sukey was, as you already know, fair to look upon, and her offer was as generous as she could make under the circumstances. So he chose a young lady, left Rita by the wall, and entered the game.

Doug Hill happened to be "It" and dropped the handkerchief behind Sukey, whereupon that young lady walked leisurely around the circle, making no effort to capture the Redoubtable. Such apathy was not only an infringement of the etiquette of the game, but might, if the injured party were one of high spirits, be looked upon as an insult.

Sukey then became "It," and, dropping the handkerchief behind Dic, deliberately waited for him to catch her; when, of course, a catastrophe ensued. Meantime, the wall was growing uncomfortable to Rita. She had known in a dimly conscious way that certain things always happened at country frolics, but to *see* them startled her, and she began to feel very miserable. Her tender heart fluttered piteously with a hundred longings, chief among which was the desire to prevent further catastrophes between Dic and Sukey.

Compared to Sukey, there was no girl in the circle at all entitled to be ranked in the Potiphar class of beauty. So, when Dic succeeded Sukey as "It," he dropped the handkerchief behind her. Then she again chose Dic, and in turn became the central figure in a catastrophe that was painful to the girl by the wall. If Rita had been in ignorance of her real sentiments for Dic, that ignorance had, within the last few minutes, given place to a knowledge so luminous that it was almost blinding. The room seemed to become intensely warm. Meantime the play went on, and the process of making Doug "sick" continued with marked success. Sukey always favored Dic, and he returned in kind. This alternation, which was beyond all precedent, soon aroused a storm of protests.

"If you want to play by yourselves," cried Tom, "why don't you go off by yourselves?"

"Yes," cried the others; "if you can't play fair, get out of the game."

The order of events was immediately changed, but occasionally Sukey broke away from time-honored precedent and repeated her favors to Dic. Doug was rapidly growing as "sick" as his most inveterate enemy could have desired. There was another person in the room who was also very wretched — one whom Dic would not

have pained for all the Sukey Potiphars in Egypt. The other person was not only pained, she was grieved, confused, frightened, desperate. She feared that she would cry out and ask Dick not to favor Sukey. She did not know what to do, nor what she might be led to do, if matters continued on their present course.

Soon after Tom's reprimand, Sukey found the duty of dropping the handkerchief again devolving upon her pretty self. She longed with all her heart to drop it behind Dic; but, fearing the wrath of her friends, she concluded to choose the man least apt to arouse antagonism in Dic's breast. She would choose one whom he knew she despised, and would trust to luck and her swift little feet to take her around the circle before the dropee could catch her.

Wetmore had been an active member, though a passive participant, in the game, since its beginning. When a young lady "It" walked back of him, he would eagerly watch her approach, and when she passed him, as all did, he would turn his face after her and hope for better things from the next. Repeated disappointments had lulled his vigil, and when Sukey, the girl of all others for whom he had not hoped, dropped the sacred linen behind his reverend form, he was so startled that he did not seize the precious moment. He was standing beside Doug Hill, and the handkerchief fell almost between the two. It was clearly intended for his reverence; but when he failed instantly to meet the requirements of the situation, the Douglas, most alert of men, resolved to appropriate the opportunity to himself. At the same moment Brother W. also determined to embrace it, and, if possible, "It." Each stooped at the same instant, and their heads collided.

"Let it alone, parson, it's for me," cried the Douglas.

Parson did not answer, but reached out his hand for the coveted prize. Thereupon Douglas pushed him backward,

causing him to be seated with great violence upon the floor. At that unfortunate moment Sukey, who had taken speed from eagerness, completed her trip around the circle, and being unable to stop, fell headlong over the figure of the self-made parson. She had not seen Doug's part in the transaction, and being much disturbed in mind and dress, turned upon poor Wetmore and flung at the worthy shepherd the opprobrious words, "You fool."

When we consider the buttons in the offering, together with Sukey's unjust and biting words, we cannot help believing that Wetmore had been born under an unlucky star.

One's partner in this game was supposed to favor one now and then, when opportunity presented; but Wetmore's partner, Miss Tompkinson, having waited in vain for favors from that gentleman, quitted the game when Sukey called him, "You fool." Wetmore thought, of course, he also would be compelled to drop out; but, wonder of wonders, Rita, the most beautiful girl in the room, rose to her feet and said: —

"I'll take your place, Miss Tompkinson." She knew that if she were in the game, Sukey's reign would end, and she had reached the point of perturbation where she was willing to do anything to prevent the recurrence of certain painful happenings. She knew that she should not take part in the game, — it was not for such as her, — but she was confused, desperate, and "didn't care." She modestly knew her own attractions. Every young man in the circle was a friend of Tom's, and had at some time manifested a desire to be a friend to Tom's sister. Tom was fairly popular for his own sake, but his exceeding radiance was borrowed. The game could not be very wicked, thought Rita, since it was encouraged by the church; but even if it were wicked, she determined to take possession of her own in the person of Dic. Out of these several

"She flung at the worthy shepherd the opprobrious words, 'You fool.'"

impulses and against her will came the words, "I'll take your place, Miss Tompkinson," and almost before she was aware of what she had done she was standing with fiercely throbbing pulse, a member of the forbidden circle.

As Rita had expected, the handkerchief soon fell behind her, and without the least trouble she caught the young fellow who had dropped it, for the man did not live who could run from her. The pledge, a pocket-knife, was deposited, and Rita became a trembling, terrified "It." What to do with the handkerchief she did not know, but she started desperately around the circle. After the fourth or fifth trip the players began to laugh. Dic's heart was doing a tremendous business, and he felt that life would be worthless if the handkerchief should fall from Rita's hand behind any one but him. Meanwhile the frightened girl walked round and round the circle, growing more confused with every trip.

"Drop it, Rita," cried Doug Hill, "or you'll drop."

"She's getting tired," said another.

"See how warm she is," remarked gentle Tom.

"Somebody fan her," whispered Sukey.

"I don't believe I want to play," said Rita, whose cheeks were burning. A chorus of protests came from all save Dic; so she took up her burden again and of course must drop it. After another long weary walk an inspiration came to her; she would drop the handkerchief behind Tom. She did so. Tom laughed, and all agreed with one accord that it was against the rules of the game to drop the handkerchief behind a brother or sister. Then Rita again took up her burden, which by that time was a heavy one indeed. She had always taken her burdens to Dic, so she took this one to him and dropped it.

"I knew she would," screamed every one, and Rita started in dreadful earnest on her last fatal trip around the circle. A moment before the circle had been too small,

but now it seemed interminable, and poor Rita found herself in Dic's strong arms before she was halfway home. She almost hated him for catching her. She did not take into consideration the facts that she had invited him and that it would have been ungallant had he permitted her to escape, but above all, she did not know the desire in his heart. She had surprised and disappointed him by entering the game; but since it was permitted, he would profit by the surprise and snatch a joyful moment from his disappointment. But another surprise awaited him. When a young lady was caught a certain degree of resistance, purely for form's sake, was expected, but usually the young lady would feel aggrieved, or would laugh at the young man were the resistance taken seriously. When Dic caught Rita there was one case, at least, where the resistance was frantically real. She covered her face with her hands and supposed he would make no effort to remove them. She was mistaken, he acted upon the accepted theories of the game. She was a baby in strength compared with Dic, and he easily held her hands while he bent her head backward till her upturned face was within easy reach.

"Don't kiss me," she cried.

There was no sham in her words, and Dic, recognizing the fact, released her at once and she walked sullenly to a chair. According to the rude etiquette of the time, she had insulted him.

There had been so many upheavals in the game that the trouble between Dic and Rita brought it to a close.

Dic was wounded, and poor Rita felt that now she had driven him from her forever. Her eyes followed him about the room with wistful longing, and although they were eloquent enough to have told their piteous little story to one who knew anything about the language of great tender eyes, they spoke nothing but reproachfulness to Dic. He

did not go near her, but after a time she went to him and said: —

"I believe I will go home; but I am not afraid to go alone, and you need not go with me — that is, if you don't want to."

"I do want to go with you," he responded. "I would not let you ride by yourself. Even should nothing harm you, the howling of a wolf would frighten you almost to death."

She had no intention of riding home alone. She knew she would die from fright before she had ridden a hundred yards into the black forest, so she said demurely: —

"Of course, if you will go with me after — "

"I would go with you after anything," he answered, but she thought he spoke with a touch of anger.

Had Dic ever hoped to gain more than a warm friendship from the girl that hope had been shattered for all time, and never, never, never would he obtrude his love upon her again. As a matter of fact, he had not obtruded it upon her even once, but he had thought of doing it so many times that he felt as if he had long been an importunate suitor.

UNDER THE ELM CANOPY

CHAPTER V

Under the Elm Canopy

DIC and Rita rode home through the forest in silence. His anger soon evaporated, and he was glad she had refused to pay the forfeit. He would be content with the friendship that had been his since childhood, and would never again risk losing it. What right had he, a great, uncouth "clodhopper," to expect even friendship from so beautiful and perfect a creature as the girl who rode beside him; and, taking it all in all, the fault, thought he, lay entirely at his door. In this sombre mood he resolved that he would remain unmarried all his life, and would be content with the incompleted sweet of loving. He would put a guard upon himself, his acts, his words, his passion. The latter was truly as noble and pure as man ever felt for woman, but it should not be allowed to estrange his friend. She should never know it; no, never, never, never.

Rita's cogitations were also along the wrong track. During her silent ride homeward the girl was thinking with an earnestness and a rapidity that had never before been developed in her brain. She was, at times, almost unconscious that Dic was riding beside her, but she was vividly conscious of the fact that she would soon be home and that he also would be there. She determined to do something before parting from him to make amends for her conduct at the social. But what should she do? Hence the earnest and rapid intellection within the drooping head. She did not regret having refused to kiss Dic. She would, under like circum-

stances, again act in the same manner. She regretted the circumstances. To her, a kiss should be a holy, sacred thing, and in her heart she longed for the time when it would be her duty and her privilege to give her lips to the one man. But kissing games seemed to her little less than open and public shame.

She could not, for obvious reasons, tell Dic she was sorry she had refused him, and she certainly would not mend matters by telling him she was glad. Still less could she permit him to leave her in his present state of mind. All together it was a terrible dilemma. If she could for only one moment have a man's privilege to speak, she thought, it would all be very simple. But she could not speak. She could do little more than look, and although she could do that well, she knew from experience that the language of her eyes was a foreign tongue to Dic.

When they reached home, Dic lifted Rita from her saddle and stabled her horse. When he came from the barn she was holding his horse and waiting for him. He took the rein from her hands, saying: —

"It seems almost a pity to waste such a night as this in the house. I believe one might read by the light of the moon."

"Yes," murmured the girl, hanging her head, while she meditatively smoothed the grass with her foot.

"It's neither warm nor cold — just pleasant," continued Dic.

"No," she responded very softly.

"But we must sleep," he ventured to assert.

She would not contradict the statement. She was silent.

"If the days could be like this night, work would be a pleasure," observed Dic, desperately.

"No," came the reply, hardly louder than a breath. She was not thinking of the weather, but Dic stuck faithfully to the blessed topic.

"It may rain soon," he remarked confusedly. There was not a cloud in sight.

"Yes," breathed the pretty figure, smoothing the grass with her foot.

"But — but, I rather think it will not," he said.

The girl was silent. She didn't care if it snowed. She longed for him to drop the subject of the weather and to say something that would give her an opportunity to speak. Her manner, however, was most unassuring, and convinced Dic that he had offended beyond forgiveness, while his distant, respectful formality and persistency in the matter of the weather almost convinced the girl that he was lost to her forever. Thus they stood before each other, as many others have done, a pair of helpless fools within easy reach of paradise. Dic's straightforward habits of thought and action came to his aid, however, and he determined to make at least one more effort to regain the girl's friendly regard. He abandoned the weather and said somewhat abruptly: —

"Rita, if I offended you to-night, I am sorry. I cannot tell you all the pain I feel. When you dropped the handkerchief behind me, I thought — I know I was wrong and should have known better at the time — but I thought — "

"Oh, Dic," she softly interrupted, still smoothing the grass with her foot, "I am not offended; it is you."

Had the serene yellow moon burst into a thousand blazing suns, Dic could not have been more surprised.

"Rita, do you mean it? Do you really mean it?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered.

"And were you afraid I was offended?"

"Yes," again very softly.

"And did you care?"

"Yes," with an emphatic nod of the head.

"And do you —" he paused, and she hesitatingly whispered: —

"Yes." She did not know what his question would have been; but whatever he wished to ask, "Yes" would be her answer, so she gave it, and Dic continued: —

"Do you wish me to remain for a few minutes?"

This time the "Yes" was given by a pronounced drooping of the head, but she took his hand for an instant that she might not possibly be misunderstood.

Dic hitched his horse to the fence, and, turning to Rita, said: —

"Shall we go over to the log by the river?"

"Yes." Ah, how many yeses she had for him that night, and yes is a sweet word.

When they were seated on the log the girl waited a reasonable time for Dic to begin the conversation. He remained silent, and soon she concluded to take the matter temporarily in her own hands. He had begun a moment before, but had stopped; perhaps with a little help he would begin again.

"I was sure you were angry," she said, "and I thought you would not forgive me this time. I have so often given you cause to dislike me."

"Oh, Rita, I don't believe you know that you could not make me dislike you. When I thought that — that you did not care for me, I was so grieved that life seemed almost worthless, but I love you so dearly, Rita —" but that was just what he had determined never, never to tell her. He stopped midway in his unintentional confession, surprised that the girl did not indignantly leave him. Her heart beat wofully. Breathing suddenly became harder work than churning. She sat demurely by his side on the log, only too willing to listen, with a dictionary full of "Yeses" on the end of her tongue, and he sat beside her, unable for the moment to think. After a long pause she determined to give him a fresh start.

"I was in the wrong, Dic, and if you wish I'll apologize to you before all who saw me. But I was frightened. I should not have gone into the game. It may be right for other girls — I would not say that it is not right — but for me, I know it would be a sin — a real sin. I am not wise, but, Dic, something tells me that certain things cannot occupy a middle ground. They must be holy and sacred, or they are sinful, and I — I did not want it to — to happen then, because — because —" there she stopped speaking. She had unintentionally used the word "then," with slight emphasis; but slight as it was, it sent Dic's soul soaring heavenward, buoyant with ecstasy.

"Why, Rita, why did you not want it to happen —" he feared to say "then," and it would seem from the new position of his arm, he also feared she might fall backward off the log.

"Because — because," came in soft whispers. The beautiful head was drooped, and the face was hidden from even the birds and the moon, while Dic's disengaged hand, out of an abundance of caution lest she might fall, clasped hers.

"Because — why, Rita?" he pleaded.

Softly came the response, "Because I wanted to be alone with — with — you when it — it happened." It happened before she had finished her sentence, but when it was finished the head lay upon his shoulder, and the birds, should they awaken, or the moon, or any one else, might see for aught she cared. It was holy and sacred now, and she felt no shame: she was proud. The transfer of herself had been made. She belonged to him, and he, of course, must do with his own property as he saw fit. It was no longer any affair of hers.

The victory of complete surrender is sometimes all-conquering; at any rate, Dic was subjugated for life. His situation was one that would be hard to improve upon in

the way of mere earthly bliss. Heaven may furnish something better, and if it does, the wicked certainly have no conception of what they are going to miss. Tom, for example, would never have put buttons in the offering. Doug would not gamble and drink. Poor, painted Nanon would starve rather than sin. Old man Jones, in the amen corner, would not swindle his neighbor; nor would Wetmore, the Baptist, practise the holy calling of shepherd, having in his breast the heart of a wolf. We all, saving a woman here and there, have our sins, little and great, and many times in the day we put in jeopardy that future bliss. But I console myself with the hope that there is as much forgiveness in heaven as there is sin on earth, save for the hypocrite. There may be forgiveness even for him, but I trust not.

I have done this bit of philosophizing that I might give Dic and Rita a moment to themselves on the sycamore divan. You may have known the time in your life when you were thankful for the sight of a dear friend's back.

There was little said between our happy couple for many minutes after the explosion; but like a certain lady, who long ago resided for a time in a beautiful garden, the girl soon began to tempt the man: not to eat apples, for Rita was one of the "women here and there" spoken of above. She was pure and sinless as the light of a star. Her tempting was of another sort. Had Rita been Eve, there would have been no fall.

After several efforts to speak, she said, "Now you will not go to New York, will you?"

"Why, Rita," he responded confidently, "of course I'll go. There is more reason now for my going than ever before."

"Why more now than ever before?" asked the girl.

"Because I want money that I may support you," he responded. "I'll tell you a great secret, Rita, but you must promise you will never tell it to any one."

"I promise — cross my heart," she answered, and Dic knew that wild horses could not tear the secret from her girlish breast.

"I'm studying law," continued Dic. "Billy Little has been buying law books for me. They are too expensive for me to buy. He bought me 'Blackstone's Commentaries' — four large volumes." The big words tasted good in his mouth, and were laden with sweetness and wisdom for her ears.

"I have read them twice," continued Dic. "He is going to buy 'Kent,' and after that I'll take up works on pleading and special subjects. He has consulted Mr. Switzer, and if I can save enough money to keep you and me for two or three years in idleness, I am to go into Mr. Switzer's office to learn the practice. It is a great and beautiful study."

"Oh, it must be, Dic," cried the girl, delightedly. "To think that you will be a lawyer. I have always known that you would some day be a great man. Maybe you will be a judge, or a governor, or go to Congress."

"That is hardly possible," responded Dic, laughing.

"Indeed it is possible," she responded very seriously. "Anything is possible for you — even the presidency, and I'll help you. I will not be a millstone, Dic. I'll help you. We'll work together — and you'll see I'll help you."

Accordingly, she began to help him at once by putting her arm coaxingly over his shoulder, and saying: —

"But if you are going to do all this you should not waste your time leading horses to New York."

"But you see, Rita," he responded, "I can make a lot of money by going, and I shall see something of the world, as you heard Billy Little say."

"Oh, you would rather see the world than me?" queried the girl, drawing away from him with an injured air, where-

upon Dic, of course, vowed that he would rather see her face than a thousand worlds.

"Then why don't you stay where you can see it?" she asked poutingly.

"Because, as I told you, I want to make money so that when I go into Mr. Switzer's office I can support you — and the others —" He stopped, surprised by his words.

"The others? What others?" asked the girl. That was a hard question to answer, and he undertook it very lamely.

"You see, Rita," he stammered, "there will be — there might — there may be — don't you know, Rita?"

"No, I don't know, Dic. Why are you so mysterious? What others — who — oh!" And she hid her face upon his breast, while her arms stole gently about his neck.

"You see," remarked Dic, speaking softly to the black waves of lustrous hair, "I must take Iago's advice and put money in my purse. I have always hoped to be something more than I am. Billy Little, who has been almost a father to me, has burned the ambition into me. But with all my yearning, life has never held a real purpose compared with that I now have in you. The desire for fame, Rita, the throbbing of ambition, the lust for gold and dominion, are considered by the world to be the great motives of human action. But, Rita, they are all simply means to one end. There is but one great purpose in life, and that is furnished to a man by the woman he loves. Billy Little gave me the thought. It is not mine. How he knew it, being an old bachelor, I cannot tell."

"Perhaps Billy Little has had the — the purpose and lost it," said Rita, being quite naturally in a sentimental mood.

"I wonder?" mused Dic.

"Poor, dear old Billy Little," mused Rita. "But you will not go to New York?" continued Miss Persistency.

Dic had resolved, upon hearing Rita's first petition concerning the New York trip, that he would be adamant. His resolution to go was built upon the rock of expediency. It was best for him, best for Rita, that he should go, and he had no respect for a poor, weak man who would permit a woman to coax him from a clearly proper course. She should never coax him out of doing that which was best for them both.

"We'll discuss it at another time," he answered evasively, as he tried to turn her face up toward him. But her face would not be turned, and while she hid it on his breast she pushed his away, and said: —

"No, we'll discuss it now. You must promise me that you will not go. If you do not, I shall not like you, and you shall not — " She did not finish the sentence, and Dic asked gently: —

"I shall not — what, Rita?

"Anything," came the enlightening response from the face hidden on his breast. "Besides, you will break my heart, and if you go, I'll know you don't care for me. I'll know you have been deceiving me." Then the face came up, and the great brown eyes looked pleadingly into his. "Dic, I've leaned on you so long — ever since I was a child — that I have no strength of my own; but now that I have given myself up to you, I — I cannot stand alone, even for a day. If you go away from me now, it will break my heart. I tell you it will."

Dic felt her tears upon his hand, and soon he heard soft sobs and felt their gentle convulsions within her breast. Of course the result was inevitable; the combatants were so unevenly matched. Woman's tears are the most potent resolvent know to chemistry, They will dissolve rocks of resolution, and Dic's resolutions, while big with intent, were small in flintiness, though he had thought well of them at the time they were formed. He could not endure the pain

inflicted by Rita's tears. He had not learned how easy and useful tears are to women. They burned him.

"Please, Rita, please don't cry," he pleaded.

The tears, while they came readily and without pain, were honest; at any rate, the girl being so young, they were not deliberately intended to be useful. They were a part of her instinct of self-preservation.

"Don't cry, please, Rita. Your tears hurt me."

"Then promise me you won't go to New York." I fear there is no getting away entirely from the theory of utility. With evident intent to crowd the battle upon a wavering foe, the tears came fast and furious.

"Promise me," sobbed Rita; and I know you will love Dic better when I tell you that he promised. Then the girl's face came up, and, I grieve to say, the tears, having served their purpose, ceased at once.

Next morning Dic went to see Billy Little and told him he had come to have a talk. Billy locked the store door and the friends repaired to the river. There they found a shady resting-place, and Billy, lighting his pipe, said:—

"Blaze away."

"I know you will despise me," the young man began.

"No, I won't," interrupted Billy. "You are human. I don't look for unmixed good. If I did, I should not find it except once in a while in a woman. What have you been doing? Go on." Billy leaned forward on his elbows, placed the points of his fingers together, and, while waiting for Dic to begin, hummed his favorite stanza concerning the braes of Maxwelton.

"Well," responded Dic, "I've concluded not to go to New York."

Billy's face turned a shade paler as he took his pipe from his lips and looked sadly at Dic. After a moment of scrutiny he said:—

"I had hoped to get you off before it happened. It's

all off now. You might as well throw Blackstone into Blue."

"What do you mean?" queried Dic. "Before what happened?"

"Before Rita happened," responded Billy.

"Rita?" cried Dic in astonishment. "How did you know?"

"How do I know that spring follows winter?" asked Billy. "I had hoped that winter would hold a little longer, and that I might get you off to New York before spring's arrival."

"Billy Little, you are talking in riddles," said Dic, pretending not to understand. "Drop your metaphor and tell me what you mean."

"You know well enough what I mean, but I'll tell you. I hoped that you would go to New York before Rita came to you. There would have been oceans of time after your return. She is very young, not much over sixteen."

"But you see, Billy Little, it was this way."

"Oh, I know all about how it was. She cried and said you didn't care for her, that you were breaking her heart, and wouldn't let you kiss her till you gave her your promise. Oh, bless your soul, I know exactly how it came about. Maxwelton's braes are um, um, um, um, yes, yes."

"Have you seen Rita?" asked Dic, who could not believe that she would tell even Billy of the scene on the log.

"Of course I have not seen her. How could I? It all happened last night after the social, and it is now only seven A.M."

"Billy Little, I believe you are a mind reader," said Dic, musingly.

"No, I'm not," replied Billy, with asperity. "Let's go back to the store. You've told me all I want to know; but I don't blame you much after all. You couldn't help

it. No man could. But you'll die plowing corn. Perhaps you'll be happier in a corn field than in a broader one. Doubtless the best thing one can do is to drift. With all due reverence, I am almost ready to believe that Providence made a mistake when it permitted our race to progress beyond the pastoral age. Stick to your ploughing, Dic. It's good, wholesome exercise, and Rita will furnish everything else needful to your happiness."

They walked silently back to the store. Dic, uninvited, entered and sat down on a box. Billy distributed the morning mail and hummed Maxwelton Braes. Then he arranged goods on the counter. Dic followed the little old fellow with his eyes, but neither spoke. The younger man was waiting for his friend to speak, and the friend was silent because he did not feel like talking. He loved Dic and Rita with passionate tenderness. He had almost brought them up from infancy, and all that was best in them bore the stamp of his personality. Between him and Dic there was a feeling near akin to that of father and son, but unfortunately Rita was not a boy. Still more unfortunately the last year had added to her already great beauty a magnetism that was almost mesmeric in its effect. There had also been a ripening in the sweet tenderness of her gentle manner, and if you will remember the bachelor heart of which I have spoken, you will understand that poor Billy Little couldn't help it at all, at all. God knows he would have helped it. The fault lay in the girl's winsomeness ; and if Billy's desire to send Dic off to New York was not an unmixed motive, you must not blame Billy too severely. Neither must you laugh at him ; for he had the heart of a boy, and the most boyish act in the world is to fall in love. Billy had never misunderstood Rita's tenderness and love for him. There was no designing coquetry in the girl. She had always since babyhood loved him, perhaps better even than she loved her parents,

and she delighted to show him her affection. Billy had never been deceived by her preference, and of course was careful that she should not observe the real quality of his own regard for her. But the girl's love, such as she gave, was sweet to him — oh, so sweet, this love of this perfect girl — and he, even he, old and gray though he was, could not help longing for that which he knew was as far beyond his reach as the bending rainbow is beyond the hand of a longing child. He was more than fifty in years, but his heart was young, and we, of course, all agree that he was very foolish indeed — which truth he knew quite as well as we.

So this disclosure of Dic's was a shock to Billy, although it was the thing of all others he most desired should come to pass.

"Are you angry, Billy Little?" asked Dic, feeling somewhat inclined to laugh, though standing slightly in fear of his little friend.

"Certainly not," returned Billy. "Why should I be angry? It's no affair of mine."

"No affair of yours, Billy Little?" asked Dic, with a touch of distress in his voice, though he knew that it was an affair very dear to Billy's heart. "Do you really mean it?"

"No, of course I don't mean it," returned Billy; "but I wish you wouldn't bother me. Don't you see I'm at work?"

Billy's conduct puzzled Dic, as well it might, and the young man turned his face toward the door, determined to wait till an explanation should come unsought.

Billy's bachelor apartment — or apartments, as he called his single room — was back of the store. There were his bed, — a huge, mahogany four-poster, — his library, his bath-tub, a half-dozen good pictures in oil and copper-plate, a pair of old fencing foils, — relics of his university

days, — a piano, and a score of pipes. Under the bed was a flat leather trunk, and on the floor a rich, though worn, velvet carpet. Three or four miniatures on ivory rested on the rude mantel-shelf, and in the middle of the room stood a mahogany table covered with *Blackwood's Magazines*, pamphlets, letters, and books. In the midst of this confusion on the table stood a pair of magnificent gold candlesticks, each holding a half-burned candle, and over all was a mantle of dust that would have driven a woman mad. Certainly the contents of Billy's "apartments" was an incongruous collection to find in a log-cabin of the wilderness.

At the end of half an hour Billy called to Dic, saying: —

"I wish you would watch the store for me. I'm going to my apartments for a bit. If Mrs. Hawkins comes in, give her this bottle of calomel and this bundle of goods. The calomel is a fippenny bit; the goods is four shillin', but I don't suppose she'll want to pay for them. Don't take coonskins. I won't have coonskins. If I can't sell my goods for cash, I'll keep 'em. Butter and eggs will answer once in a while, if the customer is poor and has no money, but I draw the line on coonskins. The Hawkinses always have coonskins. I believe they breed coons, but they can't trade their odoriferous pelts to me. If she has them, tell her to take them to Hackett's. He'll trade for fishing worms, if she has any, and then perhaps get more than his shoddy goods are worth. Well, here's the calomel and the goods. Get the cash or charge them. There's a letter in the C box for Seal Coble. Give it to Mrs. Hawkins, and tell her to hand it to Seal as she drives past his house. Tell her to read it to the old man. He doesn't know *a* from *x*. I doubt if Mrs. Hawkins does. But you can tell her to read it — it will flatter her. I'll return when I'm ready. Meantime, I don't want to be disturbed by any one. Understand?"

"Yes," answered Dic, and the worthy merchant disappeared, locking the door behind him.

Billy sat down in the arm-chair, leaned his head backward, and looked at the ceiling for a few minutes; then, resting his elbows on his knees, he buried his face in his hands. There he sat without moving for an hour. At the end of that time he arose, drew the trunk from under the bed, unlocked it, and raised the lid. A woman's scarf, several bundles of letters, two teakwood boxes, ten or twelve inches square and three or four inches deep, beautifully mounted in gold, and a dozen books neatly wrapped in tissue paper, made up the contents. These articles seemed to tell of a woman back somewhere in Billy's life; and if they spoke the truth, there must have been grief along with her for Billy. For although he was created capable of great joy, by the same token he could also suffer the deepest grief.

Out of the trunk came one of the gold-mounted boxes, and out of the box came a package of letters neatly tied with a faded ribbon. Billy lifted the package to his face and inhaled the faint odor of lavender given forth; then he — yes, even he, Billy Little, quaint old cynic, pressed the dainty bundle to his lips and breathed a sigh of mingled sorrow and relief.

"Ah, I knew they would help me," he said. "They always do. Whatever my troubles, they always help me."

He opened the package, and, after carefully reading the letters, bound them again with the ribbon, and took from the box a small ivory jewel case, an inch cube in size. From the ivory box he took a heavy plain gold ring and went over to the chair, where he sat in bachelor meditation, though far from fancy free.

Suddenly he sprang from the chair, exclaiming: "I'll do it. I'll do it. She would wish me to — I will, I will."

He then went back to the storeroom, loitered behind the

letter-boxes a few minutes, called Dic back to him, and said: —

"You are going to have one of the sweetest, best girls in all the world for your wife," said he. "You are lucky, Dic, but she is luckier. When you first told me of — of what happened last night, I was disappointed because I saw your career simply knocked end over end. No man, having as sweet a wife as Rita, ever amounted to anything, unless she happened to be ambitious, and Rita has no more ambition than a spring violet. Such a woman, unless she is ambitious, takes all the ambition out of a man. She becomes sufficient for him. She absorbs his aspirations, and gives him in exchange nothing but contentment. Of course, if she is ambitious and sighs for a crown for him, she is apt to lead him to it. But Rita knows how to do but one thing well — first conjugation, present infinitive, *amare*. She knows all about that, and she will bring you mere happiness — nothing else. By Jove, I'm sorry for you. You'll only be happy."

"But, Billy Little," cried Dic, "you have it wrong. Don't you see that she will be an inspiration? She will fire me. I will work and achieve greater things for her sake than I could possibly accomplish without her."

"That's why you're going to New York, is it?" asked Dic's cynical friend.

"Well, you know, that was her first request, and — and, you must understand — "

"Yes, I understand. I know she will coax you out of leaving her side long enough to plow a corn row if you are not careful. There'll be happy times for the weeds. Women of Rita's sort are like fire and water, Dic; they are useful and delightful, but dangerous. No man, however wise, knows their power. Egad! One of them would coax the face off of ye if she wanted it, before you knew you had a face. It's their God-given privilege to coax; but bless your

soul, Dic, what a poor world this would be without their coaxing. God pity the man who lacks it! Eh, Dic?" Billy was thinking of his own loneliness.

"Rita certainly knows how to coax," replied Dic. "And — and it is very pleasant."

"Have you an engagement ring for her?" asked Billy.

"No," responded Dic, "I can't afford one now, and Rita doesn't expect it. After I'm established in the law, I'll buy her a beautiful ring."

"After you're established in the law! If the poor girl waits for that — but she shan't wait. I have one here," said Billy, drawing forth the ivory box. "I value it above all my possessions." His voice broke piteously. "It is more precious to me . . . . than words can . . . . tell or . . . . money can buy. It brought me . . . . my first great joy . . . . my first great grief. I give it to you, Dic, that you may give it to Rita. Egad! I believe I've taken a cold from the way my eyes water. There, there, don't thank me, or I'll take it back. Now, I want to be alone. Damme, I say, don't thank me. Get out of here, you young scoundrel; to come in here and take my ring away from me! Jove! I'll have the law on you, the law! Good-by."

"I fear I should not have given them the ring," mused Billy when Dic had gone. . . . . "It might prove unlucky. . . . . It came back to me because she was forced to marry another. . . . . I wonder if it will come back to Dic? Nonsense! It is impossible. . . . . Nothing can come between them. . . . . But it was a fatal ring for me. . . . . I am almost sorry . . . . but it can bring no trouble to Dic and Rita . . . . impossible. But I am almost sorry . . . . go off, Billy Little; you are growing soft and superstitious . . . . but it would break her heart. I wonder . . . . ah! nonsense. Maxwelton's braes are bonny, um, um, um, um, um, um." And Billy first tried to sing his grief away, then sought relief from his beloved piano.

THE FIGHT BY THE RIVER SIDE

CHAPTER VI

The Fight by the River Side

DEEP in the forest on the home path, Dic looked at the ring, and quite forgot Billy Little, while he anticipated the pleasure he would take in giving the golden token to Rita. He did not intend to be selfish, but selfishness was a part of his condition. A great love is, and should be, narrowing.

That evening Dic walked down the river path to Bays's and, as usual, sat on the porch with the family. Twenty-four hours earlier sitting on the porch with the family would have seemed a delightful privilege, and the moments would have been pleasure-winged. But now Mrs. Bays's profound and frequently religious philosophizing was dull compared to what might be said on the log down by the river bank.

Tom, of course, talked a good deal. Among other things he remarked to Dic: —

"I 'lowed you'd never come back here again after the way Rita treated you last night." Of course he did not know how exceedingly well Rita had treated Dic last night.

"Oh, that was nothing," returned Dic. "Rita was right. I hope she will always — always — " The sentence was hard to finish.

"You hope she'll always treat you that-a-way?" asked Tom, derisively. "I bet if you had her alone she wouldn't be so hard to manage — would you, Rita?" Tom thought

himself a rare wit, and a mistake of that sort makes one very disagreeable. Rita's face burned scarlet at Tom's witticism, and Mrs. Bays promptly demanded of her daughter: —

"What on earth are you talking about?" Poor Rita had not been talking at all, and therefore made no answer. The demand was then made of Tom, but in a much softer tone of voice: —

"Tell me, Tom," his mother asked.

"I'll not tell you. Rita and Dic may, but I'll not. I'm no tell-tale." No, not he!

The Chief Justice turned upon Rita, looked sternly over her glasses, and again insisted: —

"What have you been doing, girl? Tell me at once. I command you by the duty you owe your mother."

"I can't tell you, mother, Please don't ask," replied Rita, hanging her head.

"You can tell me, and you shall," cried the fond mother.

"I can't tell you, mother, and I won't. Please don't ask."

"Do my ears deceive me? You refuse to obey your parents? 'Obey thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long' —"

Tom interrupted her: "Oh, mother, for goodness' sake, quit firing that quotation at Rita. I'm sick of it. If it's true, I ought to have died long ago. I don't mind you. Never did. Never will."

"Yes, you do, Tom," answered his mother, meekly. "And this disobedient girl shall mind me, too." Rita had never in all her life disobeyed a command from either father or mother. She was obedient from habit and inclination, and in her guileless, affectionate heart believed that a terrific natural cataclysm of some sort would surely occur should she even think of disobeying.

With ostentatious deliberation Mrs. Bays folded her

knitting and placed it on the floor beside her; took off her spectacles, put them in the case, and put the case in her pocket. Rita knew her mother was clearing the decks for action and that Justice was coldly arranging to have its own. So great was the girl's love and fear for this hard woman that she trembled as if in peril.

"Now, Margarita Fisher Bays," the Chief Justice began, glaring at the trembling girl. When on the bench she addressed her daughter by her full name in long-drawn syllables, and Rita's full name upon her mother's lips meant trouble. But at the moment Mrs. Bays began her address from the bench Billy Little came around the corner of the house and stopped in front of the porch.

Tom said, "Hello, Billy Little," Mr. Bays said, "Howdy," and Mrs. Bays said majestically: "Good evening, Mr. Little. You have come just in time to see the ungratefullest creature the world can produce — a disobedient daughter."

"I can't believe that you have one," smiled Billy.

Rita's eyes flashed a look of gratitude upon her friend. Dic might not be able to understand the language of those eyes, but Billy knew their vocabulary from the smallest to the greatest word.

"I wouldn't believe it either," said Mrs. Bays, "if I had not just heard her say it with my own ears."

"Did she say it with your own ears?" interrupted Tom.

"Now, Tom, please don't interrupt, my son," said Mrs. Bays. "She said to her own mother, Mr. Little, 'I won't;' said it to her own mother who has toiled and suffered and endured for her sake all her life long; to her own mother who has nursed her and watched over her and tried to do her duty according to the poor light that God has vouchsafed — and — and I've been troubled with my heart all day."

Rita, poor girl, had been troubled with her heart many days.

"Yes, with my heart," continued the dutiful mother. "Dr. Kennedy says I may drop any moment." (Billy secretly wished that Kennedy had fixed the moment.) "And when I asked her to tell me what she did last night at the social, she answered, 'I can't and won't.' I should have known better than to let her go. She hasn't sense enough to be let out of my sight. She lied to me about the social, too. She pretended that she did not want to go, and she did want to go." That was the real cause of Mrs. Margarita's anger. She suspected she had been duped into consenting, and the thought had rankled in her heart all day.

"You did want to go, didn't you?" snapped out the old woman.

"Yes, mother, I did want to go," replied Rita.

"There, you hear for yourself, Mr. Little. She lied to me, and now is brazen enough to own up to it."

Tom thought the scene very funny and laughed boisterously. Had Tom been scolded, Rita would have wept.

"Go it, mother," said Tom. "This is better than a jury trial."

"Oh, Tom, be still, son!" said Mrs. Bays, and then turning to Rita: "Now you've got to tell me what happened at Scott's social. Out with it!"

Rita and Dic were sitting near each other on the edge of the porch. Mr. Bays and Tom occupied rocking-chairs, and Billy Little was standing on the ground, hat in hand.

"Tell me this instant," cried Mrs. Bays, rising from her chair and going over to the girl, who shrank from her in fear. "Tell me, or I'll — I'll —"

"I can't, mother," the girl answered tremblingly. "I can't tell you before all these — these folks. I'll tell you in the house."

"You went into the kissing game. That's what you did," cried Mrs. Bays, "and your punishment shall be to confess it before Mr. Little." Rita began to weep, and answered gently: —

"Yes, mother, I did, but I did not — did not —" A just and injured wrath gathered on the face of Justice.

"Didn't I command you not?"

"I'll tell you all about it, Mrs. Bays," interrupted Dic. "I coaxed her to go in." (Rita's heart thanked him for the lie.) "The others all insisted. One of the boys dragged her to the centre of the room and she just had to go into the game. She only remained a short time, and what Tom referred to is this: she would not allow any one to — to kiss her, and she quit the game when she — she refused me."

"She quit the game when it quit, I 'low. Isn't that right?" asked the inquisitor.

"The game stopped when she went out —"

"I thought as much," replied Mrs. Bays, straightening up for the purpose of delivering judgment. "Now go to bed at once, you disobedient, indecent girl! I'm ashamed of you, and blush that Mr. Little should know your wickedness."

"Oh, please let me stay," sobbed Rita, but Mrs. Bays pointed to the door and Rita rose, gave one glance to Dic, and went weeping to her room. Mr. Bays said mildly: —

"Margarita, you should not have been so hard on the girl."

"Now, Tom Bays," responded the strenuous spouse, "I'll thank you not to meddle with my children. I know my duty, and I'll do it. Lord knows I wish I could shirk it as some people do, but I can't. I must do my duty when the Lord is good enough to point it out, or my conscience will smite me. There's many a person with my heart would sit by and let her child just grow up in the wilder-

ness like underbrush; but I *must* do my duty, Mr. Little, in the humble sphere in which Providence has placed me. Give every man his just dues, and do my duty. That's all I know, Mr. Little. 'Justice to all and punishment for sinners;' that's my motto and my husband will tell you I live up to it." She looked for confirmation to her spouse, who said regretfully: —

"Yes, I must say that's true."

"There," cried triumphant Justice. "You see, I don't boast. I despise boasting." She took up her knitting, put on her glasses, closed her lips, and thus announced that court was also closed.

Poor Rita, meantime, was sobbing, upstairs at her window.

After a long, awkward silence, Billy Little addressed Dic. "I came up to spend the night with you, and if you are going home, I'll walk and lead my horse. I suppose you walked down?"

"Yes," answered Dic; "I'll go with you."

"I'm sorry to carry off your company, Mrs. Bays," said Billy, "but I want to —"

"Oh, Dic's no company; he's always here. I don't know where he finds time to work. I'd think he'd go to see the girls sometimes."

"Rita's a girl, isn't she?" asked Billy, glancing toward Dic.

"Rita's only a child, and a disobedient one at that," replied Mrs. Bays, but Billy's words put a new thought into her head that was almost sure to cause trouble for Rita.

When Billy and Dic went around the house to fetch Billy's horse, Rita was sitting at the window upstairs. She smiled through her tears and tossed a note to Dic, which he deciphered by the light of the moon. It was brief, "Please meet me to-morrow at the step-off — three o'clock."

The step-off was a deep hole in the river halfway between Bays's and Bright's.

Dic and Billy walked up the river path a little time in silence. Billy was first to speak.

"I consider," said he, "that profane swearing is vulgar, but I must say damn that woman. What an inquisitor she would make. I hope Kennedy is right about her heart. Think of her as your mother-in-law!"

"When Rita is my wife," replied Dic, "I'll protect her, if I have to — to — "

"What will you do, Dic?" asked Billy. "Such a woman is utterly unmanageable. You see, the trouble is, that she believes in herself and is honest by a species of artificial sincerity. Show me a stern, hard woman who is bent on doing her duty, her whole duty, and nothing but her duty, and I'll show you a misery breeder. Did you give Rita the ring?"

"I haven't had the chance," answered Dic. "I'll do it to-morrow. Billy Little, I want to thank you — you must let me tell you what I think, or I'll burst."

"Burst, then," returned Billy. "I'd rather be kicked than thanked. I knew how Rita and you would feel, or I should not have given you the ring. Do you suppose I would have parted with it because of a small motive? Have you told the Chief Justice?"

"No; she will learn when she sees the ring on Rita's finger."

Silence then ensued, which was broken after a few minutes by Billy Little humming under his breath, "Maxwelton's braes are bonny." Dic soon joined in the sweet refrain, and, each encouraging the other, they swelled their voices and allowed the tender melody to pour forth. I can almost see them as they walked up the river path, now in the black shadow of the forest, and again near the gurgling water's edge, in the yellow light of the moon. The

warm, delicious air was laden with the odor of trees and sweetbrier, and to the song the breath of the south wind played an accompaniment of exquisite cadence upon the leaves. I seem to hear them singing, — Billy's piping treble, plaintive, quaint, and almost sweet, carrying the tenor to Dic's bass. There was no soprano. The concert was all tenor and bass, south wind, and rustling leaves. The song helped Dic to express his happiness, and enabled Billy to throw off the remnants of his heartache. Music is a surer antidote to disappointment, past, present, and future, than the philosophy of all the Stoics that ever lived; and if all who know the truth of that statement were to read these pages, Billy Little would have many millions of sympathizers.

Dic did not neglect Rita's note, but read it many times after he had lighted the candle in the loft where he and Billy were to sleep. Long after Billy had gone to bed Dic sat up, thinking of Rita, and anon replenishing his store of ecstasy from the full fountain of her note. After an unreasonable period of waiting Billy said : —

"If you intend to sit there all night, I wish you would smother the candle. It's filling the room with bugs. Here is a straddle-bug of some sort that's been trying to saw my foot off."

"In a moment, Billy Little," answered Dic. The moment stretched into many minutes, until Billy, growing restive, threw his shoe at the candle and felled it in darkness to the floor. Dic laughed and went to bed, and Billy fell into so great a fit of laughter that he could hardly check it. Neither slept much, and by sun-up Billy was riding homeward.

That he might be sure to be on time, Dic was at the step-off by half-past two, and five minutes later Rita appeared. The step-off was at a deep bend in the river where the low-hanging water-elm, the redbud, and the dog-

wood, springing in vast luxuriance from the rich bottom soil, were covered by a thick foliage of wild grape-vines.

"The river path," used only as a "horse road" and by pedestrians, left the river at the upper bend, crossing the narrow peninsula formed by the winding stream, and did not intrude upon the shady nook of raised ground at the point of the peninsula next the water's edge. There was, however, a horse path — wagon roads were few and far apart — on the opposite side of the river. This path was little used, save by hunters, the west side of the river being government land, and at that time a vast stretch of unbroken forest. Rita had chosen the step-off for her trysting-place because of its seclusion, and partly, perhaps, for the sake of its beauty. She and Dic could be seen only from the opposite side of the river, and she thought no one would be hunting at that time of the year. The pelts of fur-giving animals taken then were unfit for market. Venison was soft, and pheasants and turkeys were sitting. There would be nothing she would wish to conceal in meeting Dic; but the instinct of all animate nature is to do its love-making in secret.

"Oh, Dic," said the girl, after they were seated on a low, rocky bench under a vine-covered redbud, "oh, Dic, I did so long to speak to you last night. After what happened night before last — it seems ages ago — I have lived in a dream, and I wanted to talk to you and assure myself that it is all true and real."

"It is as real as you and I, Rita, and I have brought you something that will always make you know it is real."

"Isn't it wonderful, Dic?" said the girl, looking up to him with a childish wistfulness of expression that would always remain in her eyes. "Isn't it wonderful that this good fortune has come to me? I can hardly realize that it is true."

"Oh, but I am the one to whom the good fortune has

really come," replied Dic. "You are so generous that you give me yourself, and that is the richest present on earth."

"Ah, but you are so generous that you take me. I cannot understand it all yet; I suppose I shall in time. But what have you brought that will make me know it is all real?"

Dic then brought forth the ivory box and held it behind him.

"Oh, what is it?" cried the girl, eagerly.

"Give me your hand," commanded Dic. The hand was promptly surrendered.

"Now close your eyes," he continued. The eyes were closed, very, very honestly. Rita knew no other way of doing anything, and never so much as thought of peeping. Then Dic lifted the soft little hand to his lips, and slipped the gold band on the third finger.

"Oh, I know what it is now," she cried delightedly, but she would not look till Dic should say "open." "Open" was said, and the girl exclaimed: —

"Oh, Dic, where did you get it?"

Bear this fact in mind: If you live among the trees, the wild flowers, and the birds, you will always remain a child. Rita was little more than a child in years, and I know you will love Dic better because within his man's heart was still the heart of his childhood. The great oak of the forest year by year takes on its encircling layer of wood, but the layers of a century still enclose the heart of a sprig that burst forth upon a spring morning from its mother acorn.

For a moment after Rita asked Dic where he got the ring he regretted he had not bought it, but he said: —

"Billy Little gave it to me that I might give it to you; so it really is his present."

A shade of disappointment spread over her face, but it lasted only a moment.

"But you give it to me," she said. "It was really yours, and you give it to me. I am almost glad it comes from Billy Little. He has been so much to me. You are by nature different from other men, but the best difference we owe to Billy Little." The pronoun "we" was significant. It meant that she also was Billy Little's debtor for the good he had brought to Dic, since now that wonderful young man belonged to her.

"I wonder where he got it?" asked the girl.

"I don't know," replied Dic. "He said he valued it above all else he possessed, and told me it had brought him his sweetest joy and his bitterest grief. I think he gave it to a sweetheart long years ago, and she was compelled to return it and to marry another man. I am only guessing. I don't know."

"Perhaps we had better not keep it," returned the girl, with a touch of her forest-life superstition. "It might bring the same fate to us. I could not bear it, Dic, now. I should die. Before you spoke to me — before that night of Scott's social — it would have been hard enough for me to — to — but now, Dic, I couldn't bear to lose you, nor to marry another. I could not; indeed, I could not. Let us not keep the ring."

Dic's ardor concerning the ring was dampened, but he said: —

"Nonsense, Rita, you surprise me. Nothing can come between us."

"I fear others have thought the same way. Perhaps Billy Little and his sweetheart" — she was almost ready for tears.

"Yes, but what can come between us? Your parents, I hope, won't object. Mine won't, and we don't — do we?" said Dic, argumentatively.

"Ah," answered Rita with her lips, but her eyes, whose language Dick was beginning to comprehend, said a great deal more than can be expressed in mere words.

"Then what save death can separate us?" asked Dic. "We would offend Billy Little by returning the ring, and it looks pretty on your finger. Don't you like it, Rita?"

"Y-e-s," she responded, her head bent doubtingly to one side, as she glanced down at the ring.

"You don't feel superstitious about it, do you?" he asked.

"N-o-o."

"Then we'll keep it, won't we?"

"Y-e-s."

He drew the girl toward him and she turned her face upward.

He would have kissed her had he not been startled by a call from the opposite side of the river.

"Here, here, stop that. That'll never do. Too fine-haired and modest for a kissing game, but mighty willin' when all alone. We'll come over and get into the game ourselves."

Dic and Rita looked up quickly and saw the huge figure of Doug Hill standing on the opposite bank with a gun over his shoulder and a bottle of whiskey in his uplifted hand. By his side was his henchman, Patsy Clark. The situation was a trying one for Dic. He could not fight the ruffian in Rita's presence, and he had no right to tell him to move on. So he paid no attention to Doug's hail, and in a moment that worthy Nimrod passed up the river. Dic and Rita were greatly frightened, and when Doug passed out of sight into the forest they started home. They soon reached the path and were walking slowly down toward Bays's, when they were again startled by the disagreeable voice of the Douglas. This time the voice came from immediately back of them, and Dic placed himself behind Rita.

"I've come to get my kiss," said Doug, laughing boisterously. He was what he called "full"; not drunk, but

"'I'VE COME TO GET MY KISS,' SAID DOUG."

"comfortable," which meant uncomfortable for those who happened to be near him. "I've come for my kiss," he cried again.

"You'll not get it," answered Rita, who was brave when Dic was between her and her foe. Dic, wishing to avoid trouble, simply said, "I guess not."

"Oh, you guess not?" said Doug, apparently much amused. "You guess not? Well, we'll see, Mr. Fine-hair; we'll see." Thereupon, he rested his gun against a tree, stepped quickly past Dic, and seized Rita around the waist. He was drawing her head backward to help himself when Dic knocked him down. Patsy Clark then sprang upon Dic, and, in imitation of his chief, fell to the ground. Doug and Patsy at once rose to their feet and rushed toward Dic. Rita screamed, as of course any right-minded woman would have done, and, clasping her hands in terror, looked on fascinated and almost paralyzed. Patsy came first and again took a fall. This time, from necessity or inclination, — probably the latter, — he did not rise, but left the drunken Douglas to face Dic single-handed and alone. Though tall and strong, Dic was by no means the equal of Doug in the matter of bulk, and in a grappling match Doug could soon have killed him. Dic fully understood this, and, being more active than his huge foe, endeavored to keep him at arm's length. In this he was successful for a time; but at last the grapple came, and both men fell to the ground — Doug Hill on top. Poor Rita was in a frenzy of terror. She could not even scream. She could only press her hands to her heart and look. When Dic and Doug fell to the ground, Patsy Clark, believing himself safe, rose to a sitting posture, and Doug cried out to him: —

"Give me your knife, Patsy, give me your knife." Patsy at once responded by placing his hunting-knife in Doug's left hand. Dic saw his imminent danger and with

his right hand clasped Doug's left wrist in a grasp that could not be loosened. After several futile attempts to free his wrist, Doug tossed the knife over to his right side. It fell a few inches beyond his reach, and he tried to grasp it. Rita saw that very soon he would reach the knife, and Dic's peril brought back her presence of mind. Doug put forth terrific efforts to reach the knife, and, despite Dic's resistance, soon had it in his grasp. In getting the knife, however, Doug gave Dic an opportunity to throw him off, and he did so, quickly springing to his feet. Doug was on his feet in a twinkling, and rushed upon Dic with uplifted knife. Dic knew that he could not withstand the rush, and thought his hour had come; but the sharp crack of a rifle broke the forest silence, and the knife fell from Doug's nerveless hand, his knees shook under him, his form quivered spasmodically for a moment, and he plunged forward on his face. Dic turned and saw Rita standing back of him, holding Doug's rifle to her shoulder, a tiny curl of blue smoke issuing from the barrel. The girl's face turned pale, the gun fell from her hands, her eyes closed, and she would have fallen had not Dic caught her in his arms. He did not so much as glance at Doug, but at once carried the unconscious Rita home with all the speed he could make.

"Now for goodness' sake, what has she been doing?" cried Mrs. Bays, as Dic entered the front door with his almost lifeless burden. "That girl will be the death of me yet."

"She has fainted," replied Dic, "and I fear she's dead."

With a wild scream Mrs. Bays snatched Rita from Dic's arms in a frenzy of grief that bore a touch of jealousy. In health and happiness Rita for her own good must bow beneath the rod; but in sickness or in death Rita was her child, and no strange hand should minister to her. A blessed philosopher's stone had for once transmuted her

hard, barren sense of justice to glowing love. She carried the girl into the house and applied restoratives. After a little time Rita breathed a sigh and opened her eyes. Her first word was "Dic!"

"Here I am, Rita," he softly answered, stepping to her bedside and taking her hand. Mrs. Bays, after her first inquiry, had asked no questions, and Dic had given no information. After Rita's return to consciousness tears began to trickle down her mother's furrowed cheek, and, ashamed of her weakness, she left the room. Dic knelt by Rita's bed and kissed her hands, her eyes, her lips. His caresses were the best of all restoratives, and when Mrs. Bays returned, Rita was sitting on the edge of the bed, Dic's arm supporting her and her head resting on his shoulder. Mrs. Bays came slowly toward them. The girl's habitual fear of her mother returned, and lifting her head she tried to move away from Dic, but he held her. Mrs. Bays reached the bedside and stood facing them in silence. The court of love had adjourned. The court of justice was again in session. She snatched up Rita's hand and pointed to the ring.

"What is that?" she asked sternly.

"That is our engagement ring," answered Dic. "Rita has promised to be my wife."

"Never!" cried the old woman, out of the spirit of pure antagonism. "Never!" she repeated, closing her lips in a spasm of supposed duty. Rita's heart sank, and Dic's seemed heavier by many pounds than a few moments before, though he did not fear the apostle of justice and duty as did Rita. He hoped to marry Rita at once with her mother's consent; but if he could not have that, he would wait until the girl was eighteen, when she could legally choose for herself. Out of his confidence came calmness, and he asked,

"Why shall not Rita be my wife? She shall want for

nothing, and I will try to make her happy. Why do you object?"

"Because — because I do," returned Mrs. Bays.

"In so important a matter as this, Mrs. Bays, 'because' is not a sufficient reason."

"I don't have to give you a reason," she answered sharply.

"You are a good woman, Mrs. Bays," continued Dic, with a deliberate and base intent to flatter. "No man or woman has ever had injustice at your hands, and I, who am almost your son, ask that justice which you would not refuse to the meanest person on Blue."

The attack was unfair. Is it ever fair to gain our point by flattering another's weakness? Dic's statement of the case was hard to evade, so Mrs. Margarita answered: —

"The girl's too young to marry. I'll never consent. I'll have nothing of the sort going on, for a while at any rate; give him back the ring."

Rita slipped the ring from her finger and placed it in Dic's hand.

"Now tell me," Mrs. Bays demanded, "how this came about? How came Rita to faint?"

Rita hung her head and began to weep convulsively.

"Rita and I," answered Dic, "were walking home down the river path. We had been sitting near the step-off. Doug Hill and Patsy Clark came up behind us, and Doug tried to kiss Rita. I interfered, and we fought. He was about to kill me with Patsy's hunting-knife when — when — when I shot him. Then Rita fainted, and I feared she was dead, so I brought her home and left Doug lying on his face, with Patsy Clark standing over him."

Rita so far recovered herself as to be able to say: —

"No, mother, I killed him."

"You," shrieked Mrs. Bays, "you?"

"Yes," the girl replied.

"Yes," replied Dic to Mrs. Bays's incredulous look, "that was the way of it, but I was the cause, and I shall take the blame. You had better not speak of this matter to any one till we have consulted Billy Little. I can bear the blame much better than Rita can. When the trial comes, you and Rita say nothing. I will plead guilty to having killed Doug Hill, and no questions will be asked."

"If you will do it, Dic, if you will do it," wailed Mrs. Bays.

"I certainly will," returned Dic.

"No, you shall not," said Rita.

"You must be guided by your mother and me," replied Dic. "I know what is best, and if you will do as we direct, all may turn out better than we now hope. He was about to kill me, and I had a right to kill him. I do not know the law certainly, but I fear you had no right to kill him in my defence. I have read in the law books that a man may take another's life in the defence of one whom he is bound to protect. I fear you had no right to kill Doug Hill for my sake."

"I had, oh, I had!" sobbed Rita.

"But you will be guided by your mother and me, will you not, Rita?" Despite fears of her mother, the girl buried her face on Dic's breast, and entwining her arms about his neck whispered: —

"I will be guided by you."

Dic then arose and said: "It may be that Doug is not dead. I will take one of your horses, Mrs. Bays, and ride to town for Dr. Kennedy."

Within ten minutes Dic was with Billy Little, telling him the story. "I'm going for Kennedy," said Dic. "Saddle your horse quickly and ride up with us."

Five minutes later, Dic, Kennedy, and Billy Little were galloping furiously up the river to the scene of battle. When they reached it, Doug, much to Dic's joy, was seated

leaning against a tree. His shirt had been torn away, and Patsy was washing the bullet wound in the breast and back, for the bullet had passed entirely through Doug's body.

"Well, he's not dead yet," cried Kennedy. "So far, so good. Now we'll see if I can keep from killing him."

While the doctor was at work Dic took Billy to one side. "I told Mrs. Bays and Rita not to speak about this affair," he said. "I will say upon the trial that I fired the shot."

"Why, Dic, that will never do."

"Yes, it will; it must. You see, I had a good right to kill him, but Rita had not. At any rate, don't you know that they might as well kill Rita at once as to try her? She couldn't live through a trial for murder. It would kill her or drive her insane. I'll plead guilty. That will stop all questioning."

"Yes," replied Billy, deep in revery, and stroking his chin; "perhaps you are right. But how about Hill and Clark? They will testify that Rita did the shooting."

"No one will have the chance to testify if I plead guilty," said Dic.

"And if Doug should die, you may hang or go to prison for life on a mere unexplained plea of guilty. That shall never happen with my consent."

"Billy Little, you can't prevent it. I'll make a plea of guilty," responded Dic, sharply; "and if you try to interfere, I'll never speak your name again, as God is my help."

Billy winced. "No wonder she loves you," he said. "I'll not interfere. But take this advice: say nothing till we have consulted Switzer. Don't enter a plea of guilty. You must be tried. I believe I have a plan that may help us."

"What is it, Billy Little?" asked Dic, eagerly.

"I'll not tell you now. Trust me for a time without questions, Dic. I am good for something, I hope."

"You are good for everything concerning me, Billy

Little," said Dic. "I will trust you and ask no questions."

"Little," said Kennedy, "if you will make a stretcher of boughs we will carry Hill up to Bright's house and take him home in a wagon. I think he may live." Accordingly, a rude litter was constructed, and the four men carried the wounded Douglas to Dic's house, where he was placed upon a couch of hay in a wagon, and taken to his home, two or three miles eastward.

On the road over, Billy Little asked Dr. Kennedy to lead his horse while he talked to Patsy Clark, who was driving in the wagon.

"How did Dic happen to shoot him?" asked Billy when he was seated beside Patsy.

"D-Dic d-di-didn't shoot him. Ri-ta did," stuttered Doug's henchman.

"No, Patsy, it was Dic," said Billy Little.

"I-I re-reckon I or-orter know," stammered Patsy. "I-I was there and s-saw it. You wasn't."

"You're wrong, Patsy," insisted Billy.

"B-by Ned, I re-reckon I know," he returned.

"Now listen to me, Patsy," said Billy, impressively. "I say you are wrong, and — by the way, Patsy, I want you to do a few little odd jobs about the store for the next month or so. I'll not need you frequently, but I should like to have you available at any time. If you will come down to the store, I will pay you twenty dollars wages in advance, and later on I will give you another twenty. You are a good fellow, and I want to help you; but I am sure you are wrong in this case. I know it was Dic who fired the shot. Now, think for a moment. Wasn't it Dic?"

"We-well, c-come to think a-a-about it, I believe you're right. Damned if I don't. He t-tuk the gun and jes' b-b-blazed away."

"I knew that was the way of it," said Billy, quietly.

"B-betch yur life it was jes' that-a-way. H-how the h— did you know?"

"Dic told me," answered Billy.

"Well, that-a-a-a-way was the way it was, sure as you're alive."

"You're sure of it now, Patsy, are you?"

"D-dead sure. Wa-wa-wasn't I there and d-d-didn't I see it all? Yes, sir, d-d-dead sure. And the tw-twenty dollars? I'll g-get it to-morrow, you say?"

"Yes."

"A-and the other t-t-twenty? I'll get it later, eh?"

"You can trust me, can't you, Patsy?" queried Billy.

"B-betch yur life I can. E-e-e-everybody does. B-but how much later?"

"When it is all over," answered Billy.

"A-all right," responded his stuttering friend.

"But," asked Billy, "if Doug recovers, and should think as you did at first, that Rita fired the shot?"

"Sa-sa-say, B-Billy Little, you couldn't make it another t-t-twenty later on for that ere job about the st-store, could ye?"

"I think I can," returned Billy.

"Well, then, Doug'll g-get it straight — never you f-f-fear. He was crazy drunk and ha-ha-half blind with blood where Dic knocked him, and he didn't know who f-f-fired the shot."

"But suppose he should know?"

"B-but he won't know, I-I tell ye. I-I t-trust you; c-can't you trust Patsy? I-I'm not as big a f-fool as I look. I-I let p-people think I'm a fool because when p-people think you're a f-fool, it's lots easier t-t-to work 'em. See?"

Billy left Doug hovering between life and death, and hurried back to Dic. "Patsy says you took the gun from where it was leaning against the tree and shot Hill. I

suppose he doesn't know exactly how it did happen. I told him you said that was the way of it, and he assents. He says Doug doesn't know who fired the shot. We shall be able to leave Rita entirely out of the case, and you may, with perfect safety, enter a plea of self-defence."

Dic breathed a sigh of relief and longed to thank Billy, but dared not, and the old friend rode homeward unthanked but highly satisfied.

On the way home Billy fell into deep thought, and the thoughts grew into mutterings: "Billy Little, you are coming to great things. A briber, a suborner of perjury, a liar. I expect soon to hear of you stealing. Burglary is a profitable and honorable occupation. Go it, Billy Little. — And for this you came like a wise man out of the East to leaven the loaf of the West—all for the sake of a girl, a mere child, whom you are foolish enough to—nonsense—and for the sake of the man she is to marry." Then the grief of his life seemed to come back to him in a flood, and he continued almost bitterly: "I don't believe I have led an evil life. I don't want to feel like a Pharisee; but I don't recollect having injured any man or woman in the whole course of my miserable existence, yet I have missed all that is best in life. Even when I have not suffered, my life has been a pale, tasteless blank with nothing but a little poor music and worse philosophy to break the monotony. The little pleasure I have had from any source has been enjoyed alone, and no joy is complete unless one may give at least a part of it to another. If one has a pleasure all to himself, he is apt to hate it at times, and this is one of the times. Billy Little, you must be suffering for the sins of an ancestor. I wonder what he did, damn him."

This mood was unusual for Billy. In his youth he had been baptized with the chrism of sorrow and was safe from the devil of discontent. He was by nature an apostle of sunshine; but when we consider all the facts, I know you

will agree with me that he had upon this occasion good right to be a little cloudy.

That evening Dic was arrested and held in jail pending Doug Hill's recovery or death. Should Douglas die, Dic would be held for murder and would not be entitled to bail. In case of conviction for premeditated murder, death or imprisonment for life would be his doom. If Doug should recover, the charge against Dic would be assault and battery, with intent to commit murder, conviction for which would mean imprisonment for a term of years. If self-defence could be established — and owing to the fact that neither Dic nor Rita was to testify, that would be difficult to accomplish — Dic would go free. These enormous "ifs" complicated the case, and Dic was detained in jail till Doug's fate should be known.

THE TRIAL

CHAPTER VII

The Trial

I SHALL not try to tell you of Rita's suffering. She wept till she could weep no more, and the nightmare of suspense settled on her heart in the form of dry-eyed suffering. She could not, even for a moment, free her mind from the fact that Dic was in jail and that his life was in peril on account of her act. Billy went every day to encourage her and to keep her silent by telling her that Dic would be cleared. Mrs. Bays prohibited her from visiting the jail; but, despite Rita's fear of her mother, the girl would have gone had not Dic emphatically forbidden.

Doug recovered, and, court being then in session, Dic's trial for assault and battery, with intent to commit murder, came up at once. I shall not take you through the tedious details of the trial, but will hasten over such portions as closely touch the fate of our friends.

Upon the morning of Dic's arraignment he was brought into court and the jury was empanelled. Rita had begged piteously to go to the trial, but for many reasons that privilege was denied. The bar was filled with lawyers, and the courtroom was crowded with spectators. Mr. Switzer defended Dic, who sat near him on the right hand of the judge, the State's attorney, with Doug Hill and Patsy Clark, the prosecuting witnesses, sitting opposite on the judge's left. The jury sat opposite the judge, and between the State's attorney and Mr. Switzer and the judge and the jury was an open space fifteen feet square. On a

raised platform in this vacant space was the witness chair, facing the jury.

Doug Hill and Patsy Clark were the only witnesses for the State. The defendant had summoned no witnesses, and Dic's fate rested in the hands of his enemy and his enemy's henchman.

Patsy and Doug had each done a great deal of talking, and time and again had asserted that Dic had deliberately shot Doug Hill after the fight was over. Mr. Switzer's only hope seemed to be to clear Dick on cross-examination of Doug and Patsy.

"Not one lie in a hundred can survive a hot cross-examination," he said. "If a woman is testifying for the man she loves, or for her child, she will carry the lie through to the end without faltering. Every instinct of her nature comes to her help; but a man sooner or later bungles a lie if you make him angry and keep at him."

Doug was the first witness called. He testified that after the fight was over Dic snatched up the gun and said, "I'm going to kill you;" that he then fired the shot, and that afterward Doug remembered nothing. The story, being simple, was easily maintained, and Mr. Switzer's cross-examination failed to weaken the evidence. Should Patsy Clark cling to the same story as successfully, the future looked dark for Dic.

When Doug left the stand at noon recess, Billy rode up to see Rita, and in the course of their conversation the girl discovered his fears. Billy's dark forebodings did not affect her as he supposed they would. He had expected tears and grief, but instead he found a strange, unconcerned calmness that surprised and puzzled him. Soon after Billy's departure Rita saddled her horse and rode after him. Mrs. Bays forbade her going, but for the first time in her life the girl sullenly refused to answer her mother, and rode away in dire rebellion.

Court convened at one o'clock, and Patsy Clark was called to the stand. The State's attorney began his examination-in-chief: —

Question. — "State your name."

Answer by Patsy. — "Sh-shucks, ye know my name."

"State your name," ordered the Court.

Answer. — "Pa-Pa-Patsy C-Clark."

Question by State's Attorney. — "Where do you live?"

Answer. — "North of t-t-town, with D-Doug Hill's father."

Question. — "Where were you, Mr. Clark, on fifth day of last month at or near the hour of three o'clock P.M.?"

Answer. — "Don't know the day, b-but if you mean the d-day Doug and D-Dic had their fight, I-I was up on B-Blue about halfway b-between Dic Bright's house and T-Tom Bays', at the step-off."

Question. — "What, if anything, occurred at that time and place?"

Answer. — "A f-fight — damned bad one."

Question. — "Who fought?"

Answer. — "D-Doug Hill and D-Dic Bright."

Question. — "Now, Mr. Clark, tell the jury all you heard and saw take place, in the presence of the defendant Dic Bright, during that fight."

The solemnity of the Court had made a deep impression on Patsy, and he trembled while he spoke. He was angry because the State's attorney, as he supposed, had pretended not to know his name, whereas that self-same State's attorney had been familiar with him prior to the election.

"We'll get the truth out of this fellow on cross-examination," whispered Mr. Switzer to his client.

"Be careful not to get too much truth out of him," returned Dic.

Patsy began his story.

"Well, me and D-Doug was a-g-a-goin' up the west b-bank of B-Blue when we seed —"

State's Attorney. — "Never mind what you saw at that time. Answer my question. I asked you to tell all you saw and heard during the fight."

Answer. — "I-I w-will if you'll l-let me. J-jest you keep still a minute and l-l-let me t-talk. I-I c-can't t-t-talk very well anyway. C-can't talk near as well as you. B-but I can say a he-heap more. Whe-whe-when you talk so much, ye-ye-you g-get me to st-st-st-stuttering. S-see? Now listen to that."

State's Attorney. — "Well, go on."

Answer. — "Well, we seed Dic and Rita Bays, p-prettiest girl in the h-h-whole world, on the op-opposite side of the river, and he wa-wa-was a-kissin' her."

State's Attorney. — "Never mind that, but go ahead. Tell it your own way."

"I object," interposed Mr. Switzer. "The witness must confine himself to the State's question."

"Confine your answer to the question, Mr. Clark," commanded the Court. Patsy was growing angry, confused, and frightened.

State's Attorney. — "Go on. Tell your story, can't you?"

Answer. — "Well, Doug, he hollered across the river and said he-he wa-wa-wanted one hisself and would g-g-go over after it."

State's Attorney. — "Did you not understand my question? What did you see and hear? What occurred during the fight?"

Answer. — "Well, g-good L-L-Lord! a-ain't I tryin' to t-tell ye? When we crossed the river and g-got to the step-off, Rita and D-Dic had went away and D-Doug and me st-started after 'em down the path toward B-Bays's. When we g-got up t-to 'em D-Doug he says, says 'ee, 'I-I've come for my k-kiss,' says 'ee, jes' that-a-way. 'Ye

wo-won't get none,' says Rita, says she, jes' that-a-way, and D-Dic he p-puts in and says, says 'ee, 'I-I g-guess not,' says 'ee, jes' that-a-way. Then Doug he-he puts his gun agin' a gum tree and g-grabs Rita about the wa-waist, hugging her up to him ti-tight-like. Then he-he push her head back-like, so's 'ee c-could get at her mouth, and then Dic he-he ups and knocks him d-down. Then D-Doug he-he gets up quick-like and they clinches and falls, and D-Doug on top. Then Doug he-he says, says 'ee to me, 'G-Give me your n-knife, Patsy,' jes' that-a-way, and I ups and gives him my knife, but he d-drops it and some way D-Dic he throws Doug o-off and gets up, and Doug he picks up the knife and st-starts for Dic, lookin' wilder 'en hell. Jes' then Rita she ups with D-Doug's gun and shoots him right through. He-he trembled-like for a minute and his knees shuk and he shivered all over and turned white about the mouth like he was awful sick, and then he d-dropped on his face, shot through and through."

The confusion in the courtroom had been growing since the beginning of Patsy's story, and by the time he had finished it broke into an uproar. The judge called "Order," and the sheriff rose to quiet the audience.

State's Attorney. — "Do you mean to say, Mr. Clark, that Rita Bays fired the shot that wounded Douglas Hill?"

Douglas, you remember, had just sworn that Dic fired the shot.

Answer. — "Yes, sir, you betch yur life that's jes' the way w-w-what I mean to say."

State's Attorney. — "Now, Mr. Clark, I'll ask you if you did not tell me and many other citizens of this community that the defendant, Dic Bright, fired the shot?"

"I object," cried Mr. Switzer. "The gentleman cannot impeach his own witness."

"You are right, Mr. Switzer," answered the Court,

"unless on the ground of surprise; but I overrule your objection. Proceed, Mr. State's Attorney."

"Answer my question," said that official to Patsy.

Answer. — "Yes, sir, I-I d-did tell you, and lots of other folks, too, that D-Dic shot Doug Hill."

Question. — "Then, sir, how do you reconcile those statements with the one you have just made?"

Answer. — "Don't try to re-re-re-reconcile 'em. Can't. I-I wa-wa-was talkin' then. I'm sw-sw-swearin' now."

Dic sprang to his feet, exclaiming: —

"If the Court please, I wish to enter a plea of guilty to the charge against me."

"Your plea will not be accepted," answered the Court. "I am beginning to see the cause for the defendant's peculiar behavior in this case. Mr. Sheriff, please subpœna Miss Rita Bays."

Dic broke down, and buried his face in his folded arms on the table.

The sheriff started to fetch Rita, but met her near the courthouse and returned with her to the courtroom. She was directed to take the witness stand, which she did as calmly as if she were taking a seat at her father's dinner table; and her story, told in soft, clear tones, confirmed Patsy in all essential details.

Mr. Switzer objected to the questions put to her by the Court on the ground that she could not be compelled to give evidence that would incriminate herself. The judge admitted the validity of Mr. Switzer's objection; but after a moment spent in private consultation with the State's attorney, he said: —

"The State and the Court pledge themselves that no prosecution will be instituted against Miss Bays in case her answers disclose the fact that she shot Doug Hill."

After Rita had told her story the judge said: "Miss Bays, you did right. You are a strong, noble girl, and

the man who gets you for a wife will be blessed of God."

Rita blushed and looked toward Dic, as if to say, "You hear what the judge says?" But Dic had heard, and thought the judge wise and excellent to a degree seldom, if ever, equalled among men.

The judge then instructed the jury to return a verdict of not guilty, and within five minutes Dic was a free and happy man. Billy Little did not seem to be happy; for he, beyond a doubt, was crying, though he said he had a bad cold and that colds always made his eyes water. He started to sing Maxwelton's braes in open court, but remembered himself in time, and sang mentally.

Mrs. Bays had followed Rita; and when the girl and Dic emerged from the courthouse door, the high court of the Chief Justice seized its daughter and whisked her off without so much as giving her an opportunity to say a word of farewell. Rita looked back to Dic, but she was in the hands of the high court, which was a tribunal differing widely from the *nisi prius* organization she had just left, and by no means to be trifled with.

Dic stopped for dinner at the inn with Billy Little, and told him that Mrs. Bays refused her consent.

"Did you expect anything else?" asked Billy.

"Yes, I did," answered Dic.

"Even Rita will be valued more highly if you encounter difficulties in getting her," replied his friend.

"I certainly value her highly enough as it is," said Dic, "and Mrs. Bays's opposition surprises me a little. I know quite as well as she — better, perhaps — that I am not worthy of Rita. No man is. But I am not lazy. I would be willing to die working for her. I am not very good; neither am I very bad. She will make me good, and I don't see that any one else around here has anything better to offer her. The truth is, Rita deserves a rich man from the city,

who can give her a fine house, servants, and carriages. It is a shame, Billy Little, to hide such beauty as Rita's under a log-cabin's roof in the woods."

"I quite agree with you," was Billy's unexpected reply. "But I don't see any chance for her catching that sort of a man unless her father goes in business with Fisher at Indianapolis. Even there the field is not broad. She might, if she lived at Indianapolis, meet a stranger from Cincinnati, St. Louis, or the East, and might marry the house, carriages, and servants. I understand Bays — perhaps I should say Mrs. Bays — contemplates making the move, and probably you had better withdraw your claim and give the girl a chance."

Dic looked doubtingly at his little friend and said, "I think I shall not withdraw."

"I have not been expecting you would," answered Billy. "But what are you going to do about the Chief Justice?"

"I don't know. What would you do?"

Billy Little paused before answering. "If you knew what mistakes I have made in such matters, you would not ask advice of me."

Dic waited, hoping that Billy would amplify upon the subject of his mistakes, but he waited in vain. "Nevertheless," he said, "I want your advice."

"I have none to give," responded Billy, "unless it is to suggest in a general way that in dealing with women boldness has always been considered the proper article. Humility is sweet in a beautiful woman, but it makes a man appear sheepish. The first step toward success with all classes of persons is to gain their respect. Humility in a man won't gain the respect of a hound pup. Face the world bravely. Egad! St. George's little affair with the fiery dragon grows pale when one thinks of the icy dragoness of duty and justice you must overthrow before you can rescue Rita. But go at the old woman as if you had

fought dragons all your life. Tell her bluntly that you want Rita; that you must and will have her, and that it is not in the power of duty and justice to keep her from you. Be bold, and you will probably get the girl, together with her admiration and gratitude. I guess there is no doubt they like it — boldness. But Lord bless your soul, Dic, I don't know what they like. I think the best thing you can do is to go to New York with Sampson, the horse-dealer. He sails out of here in a few days, and if you will go with him he will pay you five hundred dollars and will allow you to take a few horses on your own account. You will double your money if you take good horses."

"Do you really think he would pay me five hundred dollars?" asked Dic.

"Yes, I believe he will. I'll see him about it."

"I believe I'll go," said Dic. "That is, I'll go if —"

"If Rita will let you, I suppose you are going to say," remarked Billy. "We'll name the new firm of horse-buyers Sampson and Sampson; for if you are not mindful this gentle young Delilah will shear you."

"I promised her I would not go. I cannot break my word. If she will release me, I will go, and will thank you with all my heart. Billy Little, you have done so much for me that I must — I must —"

"There you go. 'Deed if I don't leave you if you keep it up. You have four or five good horses, and I'll loan you five hundred dollars with which you may buy a dozen or fifteen more. You may take twenty head of horses on your own account, and should make by the trip fifteen hundred or two thousand dollars, including your wages. Why, Dic, you will be rich. Unless I am mistaken, wealth is greater even than boldness with icy dragonesses."

"Not with Rita."

"You don't need help of any sort with her," said Billy. "Poor girl, she is winged for all time. You may be bold or

humble, rich or poor; it will be all one to her. But you want to get her without a fight. You don't know what a fight with a woman like the Chief Justice means. Carnage and destruction to beat Napoleon. I believe if you had two thousand dollars in gold, there would be no fight. Good sinews of war are great peace-makers."

"I know Rita will release me if I insist," said Dic.

"I'm sure she will," responded his friend.

"I will go," cried Dic, heroically determined to break the tender shackles of Rita's welding.

"Now you are a man again," said Billy. "You may cause her to cry a bit, but she'll like you none the less for that. If tears caused women to hate men, there would be a sudden stoppage in population." Billy sat contemplative for a moment with his finger tips together. "Men are brutes" — another pause — "but they salt the earth while women sweeten it. Personally, I would rather sweeten the earth than salt it; but a sweet man is like a pokeberry — sugarish, nauseating and unhealthful. My love for sweetness has made me a failure."

"You are not a failure, Billy Little. You are certainly of the salt of the earth," insisted Dic.

"A man fails when he does not utilize his capabilities to their limit," said Billy, philosophically. "He is a success when he accomplishes all he can. The measure of the individual is the measure of what should constitute his success. His capabilities may be small or great; if he but use them all, he is a success. A fishing worm may be a great success as a fishing worm, but a total failure as a mule. Bless me, what a sermon I have preached about nothing. I fear I am growing garrulous," and Billy looked into the fire and hummed Maxwelton's braes.

That evening Dic went to call on Rita and made no pretence of wishing to see Tom. That worthy young man had served his purpose, and could never again be a factor

in Dic's life or courtship. Mrs. Bays received Dic coldly; but Mr. Bays, in a half-timid manner, was very cordial. Dic paid no heed to the coldness, and, after talking on the porch with the family for a few minutes, boldly asked Rita to walk across the yard to the log by the river. Rita gave her mother a frightened glance and hurried away with Dic before Justice could assert itself, and the happy pair sought the beloved sycamore divan by the river bank.

"In the midst of all my happiness," began Rita, "I'm very unhappy because I, in place of Patsy Clark, did not liberate you. I always intended to tell the truth. You must have known that I would."

"I never even hoped that you would not. I knew that when the time should come you would not obey me," returned Dic.

"In all else, Dic, in all else." There was the sweet, all-conquering humility of which Billy had spoken.

"In all else, Rita? Do you mean what you say?"

"Yes."

"I will put you to the test at once. For your sake and my own I should go with Sampson to New York, and I want you to release me from my promise. I would not ask you did I not feel that it is an opportunity such as I may never have again. It is now July; I shall be back by the middle of November, and then, Rita, you will go home with me, won't you?" For answer the girl gently put her hand in his. "And you will release me from my promise?"

She nodded her head, and after a short silence added: "I fear I have no will of my own. I borrow all from you. I cannot say 'no' when you wish 'yes'; I cannot say 'yes' when you wish 'no.' I fear you will despise me, I am so cheap; but I am as I am, and it is your fault that I have so many faults. You have made me what I am. Will it not be wonderful, Dic, if I, who clung to your finger

in my babyhood, should be led by your hand from my cradle to — to my grave? I have never in all my life, Dic, known any real help but yours — and some from Billy Little. So you see my dependence upon you is excusable, and you cannot think less of me because I am so weak." She looked up to him with a tearful smile in which the past and the future contributed each its touch of sadness.

"Rita, come to the house this instant!" called Mrs. Bays (to Dic her voice sounded like a broken string in Billy Little's piano).

Dic and Rita went to the house, and Mrs. Bays, pointing majestically to a chair, said to her daughter: —

"Now, you sit there, and if you move, off to bed you go." The threat was all-sufficient.

Dic sat upon the edge of the porch thinking of St. George and the dragon, and tried to work his courage up to the point of attack. He talked ramblingly for a while to Mr. Bays; then, believing his courage in proper form, he turned to that gentleman's better nine-tenths and boldly began: —

"I want Rita, Mrs. Bays. I know I am not worthy of her" (here the girl under discussion flashed a luminous glance of flat contradiction at the speaker), "and I know I am asking a great deal, but — but — " But the boldness had evaporated along with the remainder of what he had to say, for with Dic's first words Justice dropped her knitting to her lap, took off her glasses, and gazed at the unfortunate malefactor with an injured, fixed, and icy stare. Dic retired in disorder; but he soon rallied his forces and again took up the battle.

"I'm going to New York in a few days," he said. "I will not be home till November. I have Rita's promise. I can, if I must, be satisfied with that; but I should like your consent before I go." Brave words, those, to the dragoness of Justice. But she did not even look at the

presumptuous St. George. She was, as Justice should be, blind. Likewise she appeared to be deaf.

"May I have your consent, Mr. Bays?" asked Dic, after a long pause, turning to Rita's father.

"Yes," he replied, "yes, Dic, I will be glad — " Justice at the moment recovered sight and hearing, and gazed stonily at its mate. The mate, after a brief pause, continued in a different tone: —

"That is, I don't care. You and mother fix it between you. I don't know anything about such matters." Mr. Bays leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and examined his feet as if he had just discovered them. After a close scrutiny he continued: —

"Rita's the best girl that ever lived. I don't care where you look, there's not another like her in all the world. She has never caused me a moment of pain — " Rita moved her chair to her father's side and took his hand — "she has brought me nothing but happiness, and I would — " He ceased speaking, and no one has ever known what Mr. Bays "would," for at that interesting point in his remarks his worthy spouse interrupted him —

"Nothing brings you pain. You shirk it and throw it all on me. Lord knows the girl has brought trouble enough to me. I have toiled and worked and suffered for her. I bear the burdens of this house, and if my daughter is better than other girls, — I don't say she is, and I don't say she isn't, — but if she is better than other girls, I say it is because I have done my duty by her."

Truth compels me to admit that she had done her duty toward the girl with a strenuous sincerity that often amounted to cruelty, but in the main she had done her best for Rita.

Dic had unintentionally turned the tide of battle on Mr. Bays, and that worthy sufferer, long used to the anguish of defeat, and dead to the shame of cowardice, rose from

his chair and beat a hasty retreat to his old-time sanctuary, the barn. Dic did not retreat; single-handed and alone, he took lance in hand and renewed the attack with adroit thrusts of flattery and coaxing. After many bouts a compromise was reached and an armistice declared between the belligerent powers until Dic should return from New York. This armistice was virtually a surrender of the Bays forces, so that evening when Dic started home Rita accompanied him to the gate beneath the dark shadow of a drooping elm, and the gate's the place for "a' that and a' that."

Next morning bright and early Dic went to town to see Sampson, the horse-dealer. He found him sitting on the inn porch.

"Well, you're going to take the horses for me, after all?" asked that worthy descendant of one of the tribes.

"Billy Little said you would give me five hundred dollars. That is a very large sum. You first offered me only one hundred."

"Yes," returned Sampson; "I had a talk with Little. Horses are in great demand in New York, and I want an intelligent man who can hurry the drove through to Harrisburg, where I'll meet them. If we get them to New York in advance of the other dealers, we should make a profit of one hundred dollars a head on every good horse. You will have two other men with you, but I will put you in charge. Don't speak of the five hundred dollars you're to have; the others are to receive only fifty dollars each."

The truth is, Billy had contributed four hundred dollars of the sum Dic was to receive, and four hundred dollars was one-tenth of all Billy's worldly goods.

Dic completed his arrangements with Sampson, which included the privilege of taking twenty horses on his own account, and then, as usual, went to see Billy Little.

"Well, Billy Little," said Dic, joyfully, "I'm going.

I've closed with Sampson. He gives me five hundred dollars, and allows me to take twenty horses of my own. I ought to get fine young horses at twenty-five dollars a head."

"Sure," answered Billy, "that would amount to — how many have you of your own?"

"Four," answered Dic.

"Then you'll want to buy sixteen — four hundred dollars. Here is the money," and he handed him a canvas shot-bag containing the gold.

"Now, Billy Little," said Dic, "I want to give you my note for this money, bearing the highest rate of interest."

"All right," responded our backwoods usurer, "I'll charge you twelve per cent. I do love a good interest. There is no Antonio about me. I'll lend no money gratis and bring down the rate of usance. Not I."

The note signed, Dic looked upon himself as an important factor in the commercial world, and felt his obligation less because of the high rate of interest he was paying.

The young man at once began looking for horses, and within three days had purchased sixteen "beauties," as Billy Little called them, which, with his own, made up the number he was to take. His adventurous New York trip raised him greatly in the estimation of Mrs. Bays. It brought her to realize that he was a man, and it won, in a degree, her reluctant respect. The ride over the mountains through rain and mud and countless dangers was an adventure worthy to inspire respect. The return would be easier than the eastward journey. Dic would return from New York to Pittsburg by canal boat and stage. From Pittsburg, if the river should be open, he would go to Madison by the Ohio boats. From Madison he would come north to Columbus on the mail stage, and at Columbus he would be within twenty-five miles of home.

As I have told you, Mrs. Bays grew to respect Dic; and

being willing to surrender, save for the shame of defeat, she honestly kept the terms of her armistice. Thus Rita and Dic enjoyed the sycamore divan by the river's edge without interference.

On the night before his departure he gave Rita the ring, saying, "This time it is for keeps."

"I hope so," returned the girl, with a touch of doubt in her hesitating words.

He spoke buoyantly of his trip and of the great things that were sure to come out of it, and again Rita softly hoped so; but intimated in a gentle, complaining tone of voice that something told her trouble would come from the expedition. She felt that she was being treated badly, though, being such a weak, selfish, unworthy person, — so she had been taught by her mother to believe, — she deserved nothing better. Dic laughed at her fears, and told her she was the one altogether perfect human being. Although by insistence he brought her to admit that he was right in both propositions, he failed to convince her in either, and she spoke little, save in eloquent sighs, during the remainder of the evening.

After the eventful night of Scott's social, Rita's surrender of self had grown in its sweetness hour by hour; and although Dic's love had also deepened, as his confidence grew apace he assumed an air of patronage toward the girl which she noticed, but which she considered quite the proper thing in all respects.

There was no abatement of his affection this last evening together, but she was sorry to see him so joyful at leaving her. Their situation was simply a repetition of the world-wide condition: the man with many motives and ambitions, the woman with one — love.

After Dic had, for the twentieth time, said he must be going, the girl whispered: —

"I fear you will carry away with you the memory of a

dull evening, but I could not talk, I could not. Oh, Dic—" Thereupon she began to weep, and Dic, though pained, found a certain selfish joy in comforting her, compared to which the conversation of Madame de Staël herself would have been poor and commonplace. Then came the gate, a sweet face wet with tears, and good-by and good-by and good-by.

Dic went home joyful. Rita went to her room weeping. It pained him to leave her, but it grieved her far more deeply, and she began then to pay the penalty of her great crime in being a woman.

Do not from the foregoing remark conclude that Dic was selfish in his lack of pain at parting from Rita. He also lacked her fears. Did the fear exist in her and not in him because her love was greater or because she was more timid? Had her abject surrender made him overconfident? When a woman gives as Rita did she should know her man, else she is in danger. If he happens to be a great, noble soul, she makes her heaven and his then and there. If he is a selfish brute, she will find another place of which we all stand in wholesome dread.

A CHRISTMAS HEARTH LOG

CHAPTER VIII

A Christmas Hearth Log

ON the morning of Dic's departure, Billy Little advised him to invest the proceeds of his expedition in goods at New York, and to ship them to Madison.

"You see," said Billy, "you will make your profit going and coming, and you will have a nice lump of gold when you return. Gold means Rita, and Rita means happiness and ploughing."

"Not ploughing, Billy Little," interrupted Dic.

"We'll see what we will see," replied Billy. "Here is a list of goods I advise you to buy, and the name of a man who will sell them to you at proper prices. You can trust him. He wouldn't cheat even a friend. Good-by, Dic. Write to me. Of course you will write to Rita?"

"Indeed I shall," replied Dic in a tone expressive of the fact that he was a fine, true fellow, and would perform that pleasant duty with satisfaction to himself and great happiness to the girl. You see, Dic's great New York journey had caused him to feel his importance a bit.

"I wish you would go up to see her very often," continued our confident young friend; "if I do say it myself, she will miss me greatly. When I return, she shall go home with me. Mrs. Bays has almost given her consent. You will go often, won't you, Billy Little? Next to me, I believe she loves you best of all the world."

Billy watched Dic ride eastward on the Michigan road, and muttered to himself: —

"'Next to me'; there is no next, you young fool." Then he went in to his piano and caressed the keys till they yielded their ineffable sweetness in the half-sad tones of Handel's "Messiah"; afterward, to lift his spirits, they gave him a glittering sonata from Mozart. But it is better to feel than to think. It is sweeter to weep than to laugh. So when he was tired of the classics, he played over and over again, in weird, minor, improvised variations, his love of loves, "Annie Laurie," and tears came to his eyes because he was both happy and sad. The keys seemed to whisper to him, so gently did he touch them, and their tones fell, not upon his ears, but upon his heart, with a soothing pathos like the sough of an old song or a sweet, forgotten odor of a day that is past.

Billy did his best to console Rita, though it was a hopeless task and full of peril for him. There was but one topic of interest to her. Rome and Greece were dull. What cared she about the Romans? Dic was not a Roman. Conversation upon books wearied her, and subjects that a few months ago held her rapt attention, now threw her into revery. I am sorry to say she was a silly, love-lorn young woman, and not in the least entitled to the respect of strong-minded persons. I would not advise you, my dear young girl, to assume Rita's faults; but if you should do so, many a good, though misguided man will mistake them for virtues and will fall at your feet. You will not deceive your sisters; but you won't care much for their opinion.

Soon after Dic's departure, Jim Fisher, Mrs. Bays's brother, renewed his offer to take Mr. Bays as a partner in the Indianapolis store. The offer was a good one and was honestly made. Fisher needed more capital, and to that extent his motive was selfish; but the business was prosperous, and he could easily have found a partner.

One Saturday evening he came up to talk over the mat-

ter with his brother-in-law. He took with him to Blue no less a person than Roger Williams — not the original, redoubtable Roger who discovered Rhode Island, but a descendant of his family. Williams was a man of twenty-five. Boston was his home, and he was the son of a father Williams who manufactured ploughs, spades, wagons, and other agricultural implements. The young man was his father's western representative, and Fisher sold his goods in the Indianapolis district. He dressed well and was affable with his homespun friends. In truth, he was a gentleman. He made himself at home in the cabin; but he had brains enough to respect and not to patronize the good people who dwelt therein.

Of course it will be useless for me to pretend that this young fellow did not fall in love with Rita. If I had been responsible for his going to Blue, you would be justified in saying that I brought him there for the purpose of furnishing a rival to Dic; but I had nothing to do with his going or loving, and take this opportunity to proclaim my innocence of all such responsibility. He came, he stayed till Tuesday, and was conquered. He came again two weeks later, and again, and still again. He saw, but did he conquer? That is the great question this history is to answer. Meantime Dic was leading a drove of untamed horses all day long, and was sleeping sometimes at a wretched inn, sometimes in the pitiless storm, and sometimes he was chasing stampeded horses for forty-eight hours at a stretch without sleeping or eating. But when awake he thought of Rita, and when he slept he dreamed of her, though in his dreams there was no handsome city man, possessed of a fine house, servants, and carriages, sitting by her side. Had that fact been revealed to him in a dream, the horses might have stampeded to Jericho for all he would have cared, and he would have stampeded home to look after more important interests.

But to return to Fisher's visits. After supper, Saturday evening, the question of the new store came up.

Fisher said: "If you can raise three thousand dollars, Tom, you may have a half-interest in the business. I have three thousand dollars now invested, and have credit for an additional three thousand with Mr. Williams. If we had six thousand dollars, we may have credit for six thousand more, twelve thousand in all, and we can easily turn our stock twice a year. Tom, it's the chance of your life. Don't you think it is, Margarita?"

"It looks that way, Jim," said Mrs. Bays; "but we haven't the three thousand dollars, and we must think it over carefully and prayerfully."

"Can't you sell the farm or mortgage it?" suggested Fisher. Tom, Jr., gazed intently into the tree-tops, and, in so doing, led the others to ask what he was seeking. There was nothing unusual to be seen among the trees, and Mrs. Bays inquired: —

"What on earth are you looking for, Tom?"

"I was looking to see if there was anybody roosting up there, waiting to buy this half-cleared old stump field."

"Tom's right," said his father. "I fear a purchaser will be hard to find, and I don't know any one who would loan me three thousand dollars. If we can find the money, we'll try it. What do you say, Margarita?" Mrs. Bays was still inclined to be careful and prayerful.

Since Rita had expressed to Billy Little her desire to remove to Indianapolis (on the day she bought the writing paper, which, by the way, she had never paid for) so vast a change had taken place within herself that she had changed her way of seeing nearly everything outside. Especially had she changed the point of view from which she saw the Indianapolis project, and she was now quite content to grow up "a ragweed or a mullein stalk," if she could grow in Dic's fields, and be cared for by his hand.

I believe that when a woman loves a strong man and contemplates marriage with him, as she is apt to do, a comforting sense of his protecting care is no small part of her emotions. She may not consider the matter of her daily bread and raiment, but she feels that in the harbor of his love she will be safe from the manifold storms and harms that would otherwise beset her.

Owing to Rita's great change the conversation on the porch was fraught with a terrible interest. While the others talked, she, as in duty bound, — girls were to be seen and not heard in those days, — remained silent. Fortunately the fact that she was a girl did not preclude thinking. That she did plenteously, and all lines of thought led to the same question, "How will it affect Dic?" She could come to no conclusion. Many times she longed to speak, but dared not; so she shut her lips and her mind and determined to postpone discussing the question with herself till she should be in bed where she could think quietly. Meanwhile Williams seated himself beside her on the edge of the porch and rejoiced over this beautiful rose he had found in the wilderness. She being a simple country flower, he hoped to enjoy her fragrance for a time without much trouble in the plucking, and it looked as though his task would be an easy one. At first the girl was somewhat frightened at his grandeur; but his easy, chatty conversation soon dispelled her shyness, and she found him entertaining. He at first sight was charmed by her beauty. He quickly discovered that her nose, chin, lips, forehead, and complexion were faultless, and as for those wonderful eyes, he could hardly draw his own away from them, even for a moment. But after he had talked with her he was still more surprised to find her not only bright, but educated, in a rambling way, to a degree little expected in a frontier girl.

Williams was a Harvard man, and when he discovered

that the girl by his side could talk on subjects other than bucolic, and that she could furthermore listen to him intelligently, he branched into literature, art, travel, and kindred topics. She enjoyed hearing him talk, and delighted him now and then with an apt reply. So much did her voice charm him that he soon preferred it even to his own, and he found himself concluding that this was not a wild forest rose at all, but a beautiful domestic flower, worthy of care in the plucking. They had several little tilts in the best of humor that confirmed Williams in the growing opinion that the girl's beauty and strength were not all physical. He talked much about Boston and its culture, and spoke patronizingly of that unfortunate portion of the world's people who did not enjoy the advantage of living within the sacred walls. Although Rita knew that his boast was not all vain, and that his city deserved its reputation, she laughed softly and said in apparent seriousness: —

"It is almost an education even to meet a person from Boston."

Williams looked up in surprise. He had not suspected that sarcasm could lurk behind those wonderful eyes, but he was undeceived by her remark, and answered laughingly: —

"That is true, Miss Bays."

"Boston has much to be proud of," continued the girl, surprised and somewhat frightened at the rate she was bowling along. She had never before talked so freely to any one but Billy Little and Dic. "Yes, all good comes out of Boston. I've been told that if you hear her church bells toll, your soul is saved. There is a saving grace in their very tones. It came over in the *Mayflower*, as you might transport yeast. If you walk through Harvard, you will be wise; if you stand on Bunker Hill, treason flees your soul forever; and if you once gaze upon the

Common, you are safe from the heresy of the Quaker and the sin of witchcraft."

"I fear you are making a jest of Boston, Miss Bays," replied Williams, who shared the sensitiveness peculiar to his people.

"No," she replied, "I jest only at your boasting. Your city is all you claim for it; but great virtue needs no herald."

Williams remained silent for a moment, and then said, "Have you ever been in Boston?"

"I? Indeed, no," she answered laughingly. "I've never been any place but to church and once to a Fourth of July picnic. I was once at a church social, but it brought me into great trouble and I shall never go to another." Williams was amused and again remained, for a time, in silent meditation. She did not interrupt him, and at length he spoke stammeringly: —

"Pardon me — where did you learn — how comes it — I am speaking abruptly, but one would suppose you had travelled and enjoyed many advantages that you certainly could not have here."

"You greatly overestimate me, Mr. Williams. I have only a poor smattering of knowledge which I absorbed from two friends who are really educated men, — Mr. Little and Dic — Mr. Bright!"

"Are they old — elderly men?" asked Williams.

"One is," responded Rita.

"Which one?" he asked.

"Mr. Little."

"And the other — Mr. Bright — is he young?" asked the inquisitive Bostonian. There was no need for Rita to answer in words. The color in her cheeks and the radiance of her eyes told plainly enough that Mr. Bright *was* young. But she replied with a poor assumption of indifference: —

"I think he is nearly five years older than I." There

was another betrayal of an interesting fact. She measured his age by hers.

"And that would make him — ?" queried Williams.

"Twenty-two — nearly."

"Are you but seventeen?" he asked. Rita nodded her head and answered: —

"Shamefully young, isn't it? I used to be sensitive about my extreme youth and am still a little so, but — but it can't be helped." Williams laughed, and thought he had never met so charming a girl.

"Yes," he answered, "it is more or less a disgrace to be so young, but it is a fault easily overlooked." He paused for a moment while he inspected the heavens, and continued, still studying astronomy: "I mean it is not easily overlooked in some cases. Sometimes it is 'a monster of such awful mien' that one wishes to jump clear over the enduring and the pitying, and longs to embrace."

"We often see beautiful sunsets from this porch," answered Rita, "and I believe one is forming now." There was not a society lady in Boston who could have handled the situation more skilfully; and Williams learned that if he would flatter this young girl of the wilderness, he must first serve his probation. She did not desire his flattery, and gave him to understand as much at the outset. She found him interesting and admired him. He was the first man of his type she had ever met. In the matter of education he was probably not far in advance of Dic, and certainly was very far arrear of Billy Little. But he had a certain polish which comes only from city life. Billy had that polish, but it was of the last generation, was very English, and had been somewhat dimmed by friction with the unpolished surfaces about him. Dic's polish was that of a rare natural wood.

As a result of these conditions, Rita and Williams walked up the river on the following afternoon — Sunday. More

by accident than design they halted at the step-off and rested upon the same rocky knoll where she and Dic were sitting when Doug Hill hailed them from the opposite bank of the river. The scene was crowded with memories, and the girl's heart was soon filled with Dic, while her thoughts were busy with the events of that terrible day. Nothing that Williams might say could interest her, and while he talked she listened but did not hear, for her mind was far away, and she longed to be alone.

One would suppose that the memory of the day she shot Doug Hill would have been filled with horror for her, but it was not. This gentle girl, who would not willingly have killed a worm, and to whom the sight of suffering brought excruciating pain, had not experienced a pang of regret because of the part she had been called upon to play in the tragedy of the step-off. When Doug was lying between life and death, she hoped he would recover; but no small part of her interest in the result was because of its effect upon Dic and herself. Billy Little had once expressed surprise at this callousness, but she replied with a touch of warmth: —

"I did right, Billy Little. Even mother admits that. I saved Dic's life and my own honor. I would do it again. I am sorry I *had* it to do, but I am glad, oh so glad, that I had strength to do it. God helped me, or I could never have fired the shot. You may laugh, Billy Little — I know your philosophy leads you to believe that God never does things of that sort — but I know better. You know a great deal more than I about everything else, but in this instance I am wiser than you. I know God gave me strength at the moment when I most needed it. That moment taught me a lesson that some persons never learn. It taught me that God will always give me strength at the last moment of my need, if I ask it of Him, as I asked that day."

"He gave it to you when you were born, Rita," said Billy.

"No," she replied, "I am weak as a kitten, and always shall be, unless I get my strength from Him."

"Well," said Billy, meaning no irreverence, "if He would not give to you, He would not give to any one."

"Ah, Billy Little," said the girl, pleased by the compliment — you see her pleasure in a compliment depended on the maker of it — "you think every one admires me as much as you do." Billy knew that was impossible, but for obvious reasons did not explain the true situation.

Other small matters served to neutralize the horror Rita might otherwise have felt. The affair at the step-off had been freely talked about by her friends in her presence, and the thought of it had soon become familiar to her; but the best cure was her meeting with Doug Hill a fortnight after the trial. It occurred on the square in the town of Blue River. She saw Doug coming toward her, and was so shaken by emotions that she feared she could not stand, but she recovered herself when he said in his bluff manner: —

"Rita, I don't want to have no more fights with you. You're too quick on trigger for Doug. But I want to tell you I don't hold no grudge agin' you. You did jes' right. You orter a-killed me, but I'm mighty glad you didn't. That shot of your'n was the best sermon I ever had preached to me. I hain't tasted a drap of liquor since that day, and I never will. I'm goin' to start to Illinoy tomorrow, and I'm goin' to get married and be a man. Better marry me, Rita, and go along."

"I'm sure you will be a man, Doug," responded Rita. "I don't believe I want to get married, but — but will you shake hands with me?"

"Bet I will, Rita. Mighty glad to. You've the best pluck of any girl on yarth, with all you're so mild and kitten-like,

and the purtiest girl, too — yes, by gee, the purtiest girl in all the world. Everybody says so, Rita." Rita blushed, and began to move away from his honest flattery, so Doug said : —

"Well, good-by. Tell Dic good-by, and tell him I don't hold no grudge agin' him neither. Hope he don't agin' me. He ortent to. He's got lots the best of it — he won the fight and got you. Gee, I'd 'a' been glad to lose the fight if I could 'a' got you."

Thus it happened that these two, who had last met with death between them, parted as friends. Doug started for Illinois next day ; and now he drops out of this history.

I have spoken thus concerning Rita's feeling about the shooting of Doug Hill to show you how easy it was for her, while sitting beside Williams that placid Sunday afternoon, to break in upon his interesting conversation with the irrelevant remark: —

"I once shot a man near this spot."

For a moment or two one might have supposed she had just shot Williams. He sprang to his feet as if he intended to run from her, but at once resumed his place, saying : —

"Miss Bays, your humor always surprises me. It takes me unawares. Of course you are jesting."

"Indeed, I am not. I have told you the truth. You will hear it sooner or later if you remain on Blue. It is the one great piece of neighborhood history since the Indians left. It is nothing to boast of. I simply state it as a fact, — a lamentable fact, I suppose I should say. But I don't feel that way about it at all."

"Did you kill him ?" asked the astonished Bostonian.

"No, I'm glad to say he lived; but that was not my fault. I tried to kill him. He now lives in Illinois."

Williams looked at her doubtingly, and still feared she was hoaxing him. He could not bring himself to believe there dwelt within the breast of the gentle girl beside him

a spirit that would give her strength to do such a deed under any conditions. Never had he met a woman in whom the adorable feminine weaknesses were more pronounced. She was a coward. He had seen her run, screaming in genuine fright, from a ground squirrel. She was meek and unresisting, to the point of weakness. He had seen her endure unprovoked anger and undeserved rebuke from her mother, and intolerable slights from Tom, that would surely have aroused retaliation had there been a spark of combativeness in her gentle heart. That she was tender and loving could be seen in every glance of her eyes, in every feature of her face, in every tone of her soft, musical voice. Surely, thought Williams, the girl could not kill a mouse. Where, then, would she find strength to kill a man? But she told him, in meagre outline, her story, and he learned that a great, self-controlled, modest strength nestled side by side with ineffable gentleness in the heart of this young girl; and that was the moment of Roger Williams's undoing, and the beginning of Rita's woe. Prior to that moment he had believed himself her superior; but, much to his surprise, he found that Roger occupied second place in his own esteem, while a simple country girl, who had never been anywhere but to church, a Fourth of July picnic, and one church social, with his full consent quietly occupied first. This girl, he discovered, was a living example of what unassisted nature can do when she tries. All this change in Williams had been wrought in an instant when he learned that the girl had shot a man. She was the only woman of his acquaintance who could boast that distinction.

What was the mental or moral process that had led him to his conclusions? We all know there is a fascination about those who have lived through a moment of terrible ordeal and have been equal to its demands. But do we know by what process their force operates upon us? We

are fascinated by a noted duellist who has killed his score of men. We are drawn by a certain charm that lurks in his iron nerve and gleams from his cold eyes. The toreador has his way with the Spanish dons and señoritas alike. The high-rope dancer and the trapeze girl attract us by a subtle spell. Is it an unlabelled force in nature? I can but ask the question. I do not pretend to answer.

Whatever the force may be, Rita possessed it; and, linked with her gentleness and beauty, its charm was irresistible.

Here, at last, was the rich man from the city who could give Rita the fine mansion, carriages, and servants she deserved. Now that these great benefactions were at her feet, would Dic be as generous as when he told Billy Little that Rita was not for him, but for one who could give her these? Would he unselfishly forego his claim to make her great, and perhaps happy? Great love in a great heart has often done as much, permitting the world to know nothing of the sacrifice. I have known a case where even the supposed beneficiary was in ignorance of the real motive. Perhaps Billy Little could have given us light upon a similar question, and perhaps the beneficiary did not benefit by the mistaken generosity, save in the poor matter of gold and worldly eminence; and perhaps it brought years of dull heartache to both beneficiary and benefactor, together with hours of longing and conscience-born shame upon two sinless hearts.

After Rita had told her story, Roger's chatty style of conversation suddenly ceased. He made greater efforts to please than before, but the effort seemed to impair his power of pleasing. Rita, longing to be alone, had resolved many times to return to the house, but before acting upon that resolve she heard a voice calling, "Rita!" and a moment afterward a pair of bright blue eyes, a dimpled rosy face, and a plump little form constructed upon the partridge model came in sight and suddenly halted.

"Oh, excuse me," said our little wood-nymph friend, Sukey Yates. "I did not know I was intruding. Your mother said you had come in this direction, and I followed."

"You are not intruding," replied Rita. "Come and sit by me. Mr. Williams, Miss Yates."

Miss Yates bowed and blushed, stammered a word or two, and sat by Rita on the rocky bench. She was silent and shy for a moment, but Williams easily loosened her tongue and she went off like a magpie. Billy used to say that Sukey was the modern incarnation of the ancient and immortal "Chatterbox."

After Sukey's arrival, Rita could be alone, and an hour passed before she returned to the house.

That evening Billy Little took supper with Mrs. Bays, and Rita, considering Williams her father's guest, spent most of the evening on the sycamore log with the bachelor heart.

"Dic gave me the ring again," she said, holding out her hand for inspection. Billy took the hand and held it while he said:—

"It's pretty there — pretty, pretty."

"Yes," she responded, looking at the back of her hand, "it's very pretty. It was good of you — but you need not be frightened; I'm not going to thank you. Where do you suppose he is at this moment?"

"I don't know," answered Billy. "I suppose he's between Pittsburg and New York."

"I had a letter from him at Pittsburg two weeks ago," said Rita; "but I have heard nothing since. His work must be very hard. He has no time to think of me."

"He probably finds a moment now and then for that purpose," laughed Billy.

"Oh, I don't mean that he doesn't think of me! Of course he does that all the time. I mean that he must have little time for writing."

"You must feel very sure of him when you say he thinks of you all the time. How often have you thought of him since he left?" asked Billy.

"Once," replied the girl, smiling and blushing.

"Do you mean all the time?" queried Billy.

She nodded her head. "Yes, all the time. Oh, Billy Little, you won't mind if I tell you about it, will you? I must speak — and there is no one else."

"What is it you want to say, Rita?" he asked softly.

"I hardly know — perhaps it is the great change that has taken place within me since the night of Scott's social and the afternoon I shot Doug Hill. I seem to be hundreds of years older. I must have been a child before that night."

"You are a child now, Rita."

"Oh, no," she replied, "trouble matures one."

"But you are not in trouble?"

"N-o —" she answered hesitatingly, "but — but this is what I want to say. Tell me, Billy Little, do you think anything can come between Dic and me? That is the thought that haunts me all the time and makes me unhappy."

"Do you feel sure of Dic?" asked Billy.

"Indeed, I do," she replied; "I am as sure of him as I am of myself."

"How about that fellow in there?" asked Billy, pointing toward the house with his thumb.

"How? In what way?" inquired the girl.

"Don't you find him interesting?" asked Billy.

For reply she laughed softly. The question was not worth answering. The bachelor heart had felt a strong twinge of jealousy on Williams's account, because it knew that with wealth, an attractive person, and full knowledge of the world, Williams would, in the long run, prove a dangerous rival to any man who was not upon the field. The

fact that Rita dismissed him with a laugh did not entirely reassure the bachelor heart. It told only what was already known, that she loved Dic with all the intensity of her nature. But Billy also knew that many a girl with such a love in her heart for one man had married another. Rita, he feared, could not stand against the domineering will of her mother; and, should Williams ply his suit, Billy felt sure he would have a stubborn, potent ally in the hard Chief Justice. There was, of course, an "if," but it might easily be turned into a terrible "is" — terrible for Billy, Dic, and Rita. Billy had grown used to the thought that Rita would some day become Dic's wife, and after the first spasm of pain the thought had brought joy; but any other man than Dic was a different proposition, and Billy's jealousy was easily and painfully aroused. He endured a species of vicarious suffering while Dic was not present to suffer for himself. Soon he began to long for Dic's return that he might do his own suffering.

Billy's question concerning Williams had crystallized Rita's feeling that the "fellow in there" was "making up" to her, and when she returned to the house that evening, she had few words for Roger.

Monday Rita was unusually industrious during the day, but the evening seemed long. She was not uncivil to her father's guest, but she did not sit by him on the edge of the porch as she had done upon the first evening of his visit. He frequently came to her side, but she as frequently made an adroit excuse to leave him. She did not dislike him, but she had found him growing too attentive. This girl was honest from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, and longed to let Williams understand that she was the property of another man to whom she would be true in the spirit and in the letter.

Tuesday morning the guests departed. Mrs. Bays urgently invited Williams to return, and he, despite Rita's

silence, assured his hostess that he would accept her invitation. The Indianapolis project had been agreed upon, provided Bays could raise the money. If that could be done, the new firm would begin operations January first. That afternoon Rita went to the step-off and looked the Indianapolis situation in the face. It stared back at her without blinking, and she could evolve no plans to evade it. Dic would return in November — centuries off — and she felt sure he would bring help. Until then, Indianapolis, with the figures of her mother and Williams in the background, loomed ominously before her vision.

Williams's second visit was made ostensibly to Rita's father. The third, two weeks later, was made openly to her father's daughter. It was preceded by an ominous letter to Rita requesting the privilege of making the visit to her. Rita wished to answer at once by telling him that she could not receive him, but Rita's mother thought differently.

"Say to him," commanded Mrs. Bays, "that you will be pleased to see him. He is a fine young man with a true religious nature. I find that he has been brought up by a God-fearing mother. I would not have you receive him because he is rich, but that fact is nothing against him. I can't for the life of me understand what he sees in you, but if he—" she stopped speaking, and her abrupt silence was more emphatic than any words could have been. Rita saw at once the drift of her mother's intentions and trembled.

"But I would not be pleased to see him, mother," the girl responded pleadingly; "and if I write to him that I would, I should be telling a lie."

"I tell a lie," cried the stern old woman in apparent anguish. "Oh, my heart!" She sank to a chair, and gasping between her words, continued, "Oh, that I should have lived to be told by my own child that I'm a

liar!" Her head fell backward, and one would have supposed dissolution near. Mr. Bays ran to fetch a cup of water, and Rita stood in deep trouble by her mother's side fanning her. "A liar! a liar!" moaned the dying woman.

"I did not say that, mother. I said —"

"A liar! yes, I'm a liar. My own daughter that I have loved and cherished in my own bosom, and have toiled and suffered for all my life, says I'm a liar."

"Mother, I protest, dear mother, hear me," began Rita, but mother interrupted her by closing her eyes and supposedly her ears as if she were on the point of passing over. The only signs of life in the old woman were her gasps for breath. The girl, who had no deceit in her heart, could not recognize it in others, least of all was she able to see it in her own mother, whose transcendent virtues had been dinned into her ears ever since she had possessed those useful organs. Out of her confiding trustfulness came a deadly fear for her mother's life. She fell on her knees and cried: "Forgive me, mother dear, forgive me. I was wrong. I'll write whatever you wish."

This surrender, I know, was weak in our heroine; but her words restored her mother to life and health, and Rita rejoiced that she had seen her duty and had performed it in time.

Justice was soon again in equilibrium, and Rita, amid a flood of tears, wrote to Williams, "I shall be pleased to see you," and he came.

She did not treat him cordially, though she was not uncivil, and Williams thought her reticence was due to modesty, — a mistake frequently made by self-sufficient men. The girl felt that she was bound by her letter, and that she could not in justice mistreat him. It was by her invitation he had come. He could not know that she had been forced to write the letter, and she could not blame him for acting upon it. She was relieved that he attempted no

flattery, and felt that surely her lack of cordiality would prevent another visit. But she was mistaken. He was not a man easily rebuffed.

A fortnight later Mrs. Bays announced to her daughter the receipt of a letter from Mr. Williams, stating that he would be on hand next Saturday evening.

"He is trying to induce his father to loan us the money," said Mrs. Bays, "and your father and I want you to be particularly kind to him. Your father and I have suffered and worked and toiled for you all your life. Now you can help us, and you shall do so."

"Mother, I can't receive him. I can't talk to him. It will be wicked. It would not be honest; I can't, I can't," sobbed poor Rita. "I don't know much, but I know it is wrong for me to receive visits from Mr. Williams when there can be nothing between — between —"

"Why can't there be anything between you and Williams, girl? Why?" demanded Mrs. Bays.

"There are many reasons, mother," returned the weeping girl, "even if it were not for Dic —"

"Dic!" screamed the old woman, and an attack of heart trouble at once ensued, when Rita was again called upon to save her mother's life.

Thus Williams came the third time to visit Rita, and showed his ignorance of womankind by proposing marriage to a girl who was unwilling to listen. He was promptly but politely rejected, and won the girl's contempt by asking for her friendship if he could not have her love. The friendship, of course, was readily granted. She was eager to give that much to all the world.

"I hope you will not speak of this, even to your father or mother," said Williams. "Let it be hereafter as if I had never spoken. I regret that I did speak."

Rita gladly consented to comply with his request, since she was certain heart trouble would ensue, with probably

fatal results, should her mother learn that she had refused the young man with the true religious nature.

Williams adroitly regained his ground by exciting Rita's ever ready sympathy, and hoped to remain in the battle upon the plane of friendship until another and more favorable opportunity should arise for a successful attack. His was a tenacious nature that held to a purpose by hook or by crook till victory crowned his efforts or defeat was absolute.

Williams continued to visit Rita, and Dic did not return till Christmas. During the last month of waiting the girl's patient longing was piteous to behold. To see her brought grief to Billy's heart, but it angered the Chief Justice.

Dic had written that he would be home by the middle of November, and Rita had counted the days, even the hours, up to that time; but when he did not arrive as expected, she had not even the poor comfort of computing time, for she did not know when to expect him. Each day of longing and fear ended in disappointment and tears, until at last, on the day before Christmas, she heard from the lips of Sukey Yates that Dic was at home. There was a touch of disappointment in receiving the news from Sukey, but the news was so welcome that she was glad to have it from any one.

Sukey had ridden over to see Rita. "Why, haven't you seen him yet?" cried the dimpler, in surprise. "I supposed, of course, he would come here first — before seeing me. Why, I'm quite proud."

"No," returned Rita; "I have not seen him."

"He'll come this evening, I'm sure," said Sukey, patronizingly. "I have company to-night. He's looking well, though he was sick for three or four weeks at an inn near Wheeling. His illness caused the delay in getting home. I just thought he never would come, didn't you?"

Rita was too happy to be disturbed by insinuations

of any kind, and although she would have liked to be the first person to see Dic, she paid no heed to Sukey's suggestive remarks.

"He's as handsome as ever," continued Sukey, "and has a mustache. But you will see him for yourself this evening. Good-by. I must be going. Now come over real soon."

"I will," answered Rita, and Sukey left her musing happily upon the hearth log.

Mr. Bays had been in Indianapolis for several days. He had not raised the three thousand dollars, Williams, Sr., being at that time short of money. Mrs. Bays and Tom had that evening driven to town to meet the nominal head of the house. It was two o'clock when Sukey left Rita gazing into the fire and computing the minutes till evening, when she knew Dic would be with her. He might possibly come over for supper.

The weather was cold, and snow had been falling since noon. The sycamore log was under the snow, and she did not hope to have Dic to herself; but to have him at all would be joy sufficient, and she would dream of him until he should come. While dreaming, she turned her face toward the window to watch the falling snow. She did not see the snow, but instead saw a man. She did not scream with delight, as I suppose she should have done; she simply rose to her feet and waited in the fireplace till the door opened and Dic walked in. She did not go to him, but stood motionless till he came to her.

"Are you not glad to see me, Rita?" he asked. He could not see her eyes in the dark room, or he would have had no need to ask. "Are you not glad?" he repeated. She did not answer, but taking his face between her hands drew it down to hers with infinite tenderness and passion. Then, with her arms about his neck, she spoke the one word, "Glad?" and Dic knew.

After she had uttered the big word of one syllable, she buried her face on his breast and began to weep.

"Don't cry, Rita," pleaded Dic, "don't cry. I can't bear it."

"Ah, but let me cry for one little moment," she begged. "It is better than laughing, and it helps me so much." There was, of course, but one answer, and Dic, turning up her tear-stained face, replied eloquently.

After a chaotic period of several minutes they took their childhood's place upon the hearth log within the warm, bright fireplace. Dic stirred the fire, and the girl, nestling beside him, said: —

"Now tell me everything."

"Where shall I begin?" asked Dic; and after a pause in which to find a starting-point, he said: —

"I have brought you a little present. I wanted to keep it till to-morrow — Christmas — but I find I cannot." He produced a small gold watch with the word "Rita" engraved upon the lid. Rita was delighted; but after a moment or two of admiration she repeated her request.

Dic rapidly ran over the events of his trip. He had brought home twenty-six hundred dollars, and the gold was at that moment in Billy Little's iron-box. Of the wonders he had seen he would tell her at leisure. He had received her three letters, and had them in his pocket in a small leather case purchased expressly to hold them. They had never left his person. He had been ill at an inn near Wheeling, and was "out of his head" for three weeks; hence his failure to write during that time.

"Yes, Sukey told me you had been ill. I was sorry to learn it. Especially — especially from her," said the girl, with eyes bent demurely upon the hearth.

"Why from her?" asked Dic.

"Well, from any one," she replied. "I hoped you would come to see me first. You see, I am a very exact-

ing, jealous, disagreeable person, Dic, and I wanted you to see me and tell me everything before you should go to see any one else."

"Indeed, I would," he returned. "I have come here first."

"Did you not go around by Sukey's and see her on your way home?" Rita asked.

"I did not," replied Dic. "She was in town and rode with mother and me as far as the Yates cross-path. She heard me telling mother I had been ill."

Dic did not tell Rita that Sukey had whispered to him in Billy Little's store that she, Sukey, had been going to town every day during the last fortnight in the hope that she might be the first one to see him, and that she was so wild with joy at his return that she could easily find it in her heart to kiss him right then and there in full view of a large and appreciative audience; and that if he would come over Christmas night when the folks were going to Marion, she would remain at home and — and would he come? Dic did not mention these small matters, and, in fact, had forgotten what Sukey had said, not caring a bawbee how often she had gone to meet him or any one else, and having no intention to accept her hospitality Christmas night. Sukey's words had, for a moment, tickled his vanity, — an easy task for a pretty woman with any man, — but they had gone no deeper than his vanity, which, in Dic's case, was not very deep.

DIC LENDS MONEY GRATIS

CHAPTER IX

Dic Lends Money Gratis

SUCH an hour as our young friends spent upon the ciphering log would amply compensate for the trouble of living a very long life. "Everything," as Rita had asked, was told volubly, until Dic, perhaps by accident, clasped Rita's hand. His failure to do so earlier in the afternoon had been an oversight; but after the oversight had been corrected, comparative silence and watching the fire from the ciphering log proved a sufficiently pleasant pastime, and amply good enough for them. Good enough! I hope they have fireplaces and ciphering logs, soft, magnetic hands, and eloquent silence in paradise, else the place will surely be a failure.

Snow was falling furiously, and dark winter clouds obscured the sinking sun, bringing night before its time; and so it happened that Rita did not see her mother pass the window. The room was dark, save in the fireplace where Rita and Dic were sitting, illumined by the glow of hickory embers, and occasionally by a flickering flame that spluttered from the half-burned back-log. Unexpected and undesired, Mrs. Bays, followed closely by our friend Williams, entered through the front door. Dic sprang to his feet, but he was too slow by several seconds, and the newcomers had ample opportunity to observe his strict attention to the business in hand. Mrs. Bays bowed stiffly to Dic, and walked to the bed, where she deposited her wraps.

Williams approached Rita, who was still seated in the fireplace. She rose and accepted his proffered hand, forgetting in her confusion to introduce Dic. Roger's self-composure came to his relief.

"This must be Mr. Bright," said he, holding out his hand to Dic. "I have heard a great deal of you from Miss Bays during the last four months. We heard in town that you had returned. Since Rita will not introduce me, I will perform that duty for myself. I am Mr. Williams."

"How do you do," said Dic, as he took Roger's hand.

"I am delighted to meet you," said Williams, which, as we know, was a polite fiction. Dic had no especial occasion to dispute Williams's statement, but for some undefined reason he doubted its truth. He did not, however, doubt his own feelings, but knew that he was not glad to meet Williams. The words, "I have heard a great deal of you from Miss Bays during the last four months," had so startled him that he could think of nothing else. After the narrative of his own adventures, he had, in imitation of Rita, asked *her* to tell *him* "everything"; but the name of Williams, her four-months' friend, had not been mentioned. Dic could not know that the girl had forgotten Williams's very existence in the moment of her joy. Her forgetfulness was the best evidence that Williams was nothing to her; but, I confess, her failure to speak of him had an ugly appearance. Williams turned to Rita, and, with a feeling of satisfaction because Dic was present, handed her a small package, saying:—

"I have brought you a little Christmas gift."

Rita hesitatingly accepted the package with a whispered "Thank you," and Mrs. Bays stepped to her side, exclaiming:—

"Ah, how kind of you, Mr. Williams."

Rita, Mrs. Bays, and Williams were facing the fire, and

Dic stood back in the shadow of the room. A deep, black shadow it was to Dic.

Mrs. Bays, taking the package from Rita's hand, opened it; and there, nestling in a bed of blue velvet, was a tiny watch, rich with jewels, and far more beautiful than the one Dic had brought from New York. Encircling the watch were many folds of a massive gold chain. Mrs. Bays held the watch up to the light of the firelight, and Dic, with an aching sensation in the region of his heart, saw its richness at a glance. He knew at once that the giver must be a man of wealth; and when Mrs. Bays delightedly threw the gold chain over Rita's head, and placed the watch in her unresisting hand, he remarked that he must be going. Poor, terrified Rita did not hear Dic's words. Receiving no reply, he took his hat from the floor where he had dropped it on entering the room several centuries before, opened the door, and walked out.

All that I have narrated as taking place after Williams entered upon the scene occurred within the space of two or three minutes, and Rita first learned that Dic was going when she heard the door close.

"Dic!" she cried, and started to follow him, but her mother caught her wrist and said sternly: —

"Stay here, Rita. Don't go to the door."

"But, mother — "

"Stay here, I command you," and Rita did not go to the door. Dic met Mr. Bays at the gate, paused for a word of greeting, and plunged into the snow-covered forest, while the words "during the last four months" rang in his ears with a din that was almost maddening.

"She might have told me," he muttered, speaking as if to the storm. "While I have been thinking of her every moment, she has been listening to him. But her letters were full of love. She surely loved me when I met her two hours ago. No woman could feign love so perfectly.

She must love me. I can't believe otherwise. I will see her again to-night and she will explain all, I am sure. There is no deceit in her." His returning confidence eased, though it did not cure, his pain. It substituted another after a little time — suspense. It was not in his nature to brook suspense, and he determined again and again to see Rita that evening.

But his suspense was ended without seeing Rita. When he reached home he found Sukey, blushing and dimpling, before the fire, talking to his mother.

"Been over to see Rita?" she asked, parting her moist, red lips in a smile, showing a gleam of her little, white teeth, and dimpling exquisitely.

"Yes," answered Dic, laconically.

"Thought maybe you would stay for supper," she continued.

"No," replied Dic.

"Perhaps the other fellow was there," remarked Sukey, shrugging her plump shoulders and laughing softly. Dic did not reply, but drew a chair to the hearth.

"Guess they're to be married soon," volunteered Sukey. "He has been coming Saturdays and staying over Sunday ever since you left. Guess he waited for you to get out of the way. I think he's so handsome. Met him one Sunday afternoon at the step-off. I went over to see Rita, and her mother said she had gone to take a walk with Mr. Williams in that direction after dinner. I knew they would be at the step-off; it's such a lonely place. He lives in Boston, and they say he's enormously rich." During the long pause that followed Dic found himself entirely relieved of suspense. There was certainty to his heart's content. He did not show his pain; and much to her joy Sukey concluded that Dic did not care anything about the relations between Williams and Rita.

"Rita showed me the ring he gave her," continued

Sukey. Dic winced, but controlled himself. It was his ring that Sukey had seen on Rita's finger, but Dic did not know that.

"Some folks envy her," observed the dimpler, staring in revery at the fire. "She'll have a fine house, servants, and carriages" — Dic remembered having used those fatal words himself — "and will live in Boston; but for myself — well, I never intend to marry, but if I do I'll take one of the boys around here, or I'll die single. The boys here are plenty good enough for me."

The big, blue eyes, covered by downcast lashes, were carefully examining a pair of plump, little, brown hands resting in her lap, but after a pause she flashed a hurried glance upon Dic, which he did not see.

When a woman cruelly wounds a man as Rita had wounded Dic, the first remedy that suggests itself to the normal masculine mind is another woman, and the remedy is usually effective. There may not be as good fish in the sea as the one he wants, but good fish there are, in great numbers. Balm of Gilead doubtless has curative qualities; but for a sore, jealous, aching, masculine heart I would every time recommend the fish of the sea.

Sukey, upon Mrs. Bright's invitation, remained for supper, and Dic, of course, was compelled to take her home. Upon arrival at the Yates mansion, Sukey invited Dic to enter. Dic declined. She drew off her mittens and took his hand.

"Why," she said, "your hands are like ice; you must come in and warm them. Please do," so Dic hitched his horse under a straw-covered shed and went in with the remedy. One might have travelled far and wide before finding a more pleasant remedy than Sukey; but Dic's ailments were beyond cure, and Sukey's smiles might as well have been wasted upon her brother snowman in the adjacent field.

Soon after Dic's arrival, all the family, save Sukey, adjourned to the kitchen, leaving the girl and her "company" to themselves, after the dangerous manner of the times.

If any member of the family should remain in the room where the young lady of the house was entertaining a friend, the visitor would consider himself *persona non grata*, and would come never again. Of course the Bays family had never retired before Dic; but he had always visited Tom, not Rita.

The most unendurable part of Williams's visits to Rita was the fact that they were made to her, and that she was compelled to sit alone with him through the long evenings, talking as best she could to one man and longing for another. When that state of affairs exists, and the woman happens to be a wife, the time soon comes when she sighs for the pleasures of purgatory; yet we all know some poor woman who meets the wrong man every day and gives him herself and her life because God, in His inscrutable wisdom, has permitted a terrible mistake. To this bondage would Rita's mother sell her.

Dic did not remain long with the tempting little remedy. While his hand was on the latch she detained him with many questions, and danced about him in pretty impatience.

"Why do you go?" she asked poutingly.

"You said Bob Kaster was coming," replied Dic.

"Oh, well, you stay and I'll send him about his business quickly enough," she returned.

"Would you, Sukey?" asked Dic, laughing.

"Indeed, I will," she responded, "or any one else, if you will stay."

She took his hand again, and, leaning against him, smiled pleadingly into his face. Her smiles were as sweet and enticing as she or any other girl could make. There were no redder lips, no whiter teeth, nor prettier dimples than

Sukey's on all Blue River or any other river, and there could be no prettier, more tempting picture than this pouting little nymph who was pleading with our Joseph not to run away. But Dic, not caring to remain, hurriedly closed the door and went out into the comforting storm. After he had gone Sukey went to the ciphering log and sat gazing meditatively into the fire. Vexation and disappointment alternately held possession of her soul; but Dic was more attractive to her because he was unattainable, and she imagined herself greatly injured and deeply in love. She may have imagined the truth; but Sukey, though small in herself, had a large, comprehensive heart wherein several admirers might be accommodated without overtaxing its capacity, and soon she was comforting herself with Bob Kaster.

There was little rest for Dic that night. Had he been able to penetrate darkness and log walls, and could he have seen Rita sobbing with her face buried in her pillow, he might have slept soundly. But darkness and log walls are not to be penetrated by ordinary eyes.

Riding home from Sukey's, Dic thought he had learned to hate Rita. He swore mighty oaths that he would never look upon her face again. But when he had rested a little time in bed he recalled her fair face, her gentleness, her honesty, and her thousand perfections. He remembered the small hand he had held so tenderly a few hours since. Its magnetic touch, soft as the hand of a duchess, still tingled through his nerves. With these memories came an anguish that beat down his pride, and, like Rita, he clasped his hands over his head, turned his face to his pillow, and alas! that I should say it of a strong man, wept bitter, scalding tears.

Do the real griefs of life come with age? If Dic should live till his years outnumbered those of Methuselah, no pain could ever come to him worthy of mention compared to this. It awakened him to the quality and quantity of his

love. It seemed that he had loved her ever since she lisped his name and clung to his finger in tottering babyhood. He looked back over the years and failed to see one moment in all the myriads of moments when he did not believe himself first in her heart as she had always been first in his; and now, after he had waited patiently, and after she, out of her own full heart, had confessed her woman's love, after she had given him herself in abject, sweet surrender, and had taken him for her own, the thought of her perfidy was torture to him. Then came again like a soothing balm the young memory of their last meeting. He recalled and weighed every word, act, and look. Surely, he thought, no woman could feign the love she had shown for him. She had not even tried to show her love. It had been irrepressible. Why should she wish to feign a love she did not feel? There was nothing she could gain by deceit. But upon the heels of this slight hope came that incontestable fact, — Williams. Dic could see her sitting with the stranger as she had sat with himself at the step-off. Williams had been coming for four months. She might be in his arms at that moment — the hour was still early — before the old familiar fireplace, while the family were in the kitchen. He could not endure the picture he had conjured, so he rose from his bed, dressed, stole softly from the house, and walked through the winter storm down the river to Bays's. Feeling like a thief, he crept to the window. The night being cold, the fire had not been banked, but threw its glow out into the room; and Dic's heart leaped for joy when he saw the room was empty. At that same moment Rita was in her own room, not twenty feet away from him, sobbing on her pillow and wishing she were dead.

Dick's discovery of the empty room had no real significance, but it seemed a good omen, and he went home and slept.

Rita did not sleep. She knew the first step had been taken to separate her from Dic. She feared the separation was really effected. She had offended this manly, patient lover so frequently that surely, she thought, he would not forgive her this last and greatest insult. She upbraided herself for having, through stupidity and cowardice, allowed him to leave her. He had belonged to her for years; and the sweet thought that she belonged to him, and that it was her God-given privilege to give herself to him and to no other, pressed upon her heart, and she cried out in the darkness: "I will not give him up! I will not! If he will forgive me, I will fall upon my knees and beg him to try me once again."

Christmas was a long, wretched day for Dic. What it was to Rita you may easily surmise. Early after supper Dic walked over to see Sukey, and his coming filled that young lady's ardent little soul with delight. His reasons for going would be hard to define. Perhaps his chief motive was the hope of running away from himself, and the possibility of hearing another budget of unwelcome news concerning Rita and Williams. He dreaded to hear it; but he longed to know all there was to be known, and he felt sure Sukey had exhaustive knowledge on the subject, and would be ready to impart it upon invitation.

He had been sitting with Sukey half an hour when Tom Bays walked in. Thomas, of course, could not remain when he found the field occupied; and much to Dic's regret and Sukey's delight he took his departure, after a visit of ten minutes. Dic urged him to remain, saying that he was going soon, and Sukey added, "Yes, won't you stay?" But she was far from enthusiastic, and Thomas went home with disappointment in his heart and profanity on his lips.

When Tom entered the room where Rita was doing her best to entertain Williams, she said, "I thought you were going to see Sukey?"

"Dic's there," answered Tom, and Rita's white face grew whiter.

Tom started toward the back door on his way to the kitchen, where his father and mother were sitting, and Rita said, pleadingly: —

"Don't go, Tom; stay here with us. Please do." She forgot Williams and continued: "Please, brother. I don't ask much of you. This is a little thing to do for me. Please stay here," but brother laughed and went to the kitchen without so much as answering her.

When the door closed on Tom, Rita stood for a moment in front of the fireplace, and, covering her face with her hands, began to weep. Williams approached her, overflowing with consolation, and placed his hand caressingly upon her arm. She sprang from him as if she had been stung, and cried out: —

"Don't put your hand on me! Don't touch me!" She stepped backward toward the door leading upstairs to her room.

"Why, Rita," said Williams, "I did not intend anything wrong. I would not offend you for all the world. You are nervous, Rita, and — and —"

"Don't call me Rita," she interrupted, sobbing. "I hate — I hate —" she was going to say "I hate you," but said, — "the name."

He still approached her, though she had been retreating backward step by step. He had no thought of touching her; but as he came toward her, she lost self-control and almost screamed: —

"Don't touch me, I say! Don't touch me!" She had endured his presence till she could bear it no longer, and the thought of Dic sitting with Sukey had so wrought upon her that her self-control was exhausted. Williams walked back to the fireplace, and Rita, opening the stair door, hurriedly went to her room.

"COVERING HER FACE WITH HER HANDS, SHE BEGAN TO WEEP."

She was not one in whom the baser sort of jealousy could exist; but the thought of Dic, her Dic, sitting with Sukey, while she was compelled to endure the presence of the man she had learned almost to hate, burned her. Her jealousy did not take the form of hatred toward Sukey, and the pain it brought her was chiefly because it confirmed her in the belief that she had lost Dic. She did not doubt that Dic had loved her, and her faith in that fact quickened her sense of loss. She blamed no one but herself for the fact that he no longer loved her, and was seeking another. Still, she was jealous, though even that unholy passion could not be base in her.

Sukey smiled and dimpled at Dic for an hour or two with no appreciable effect. He sat watching the fire, seeing none of her little love signals, and went home quite as wretched as he had come. Evidently, Sukey was the wrong remedy, though upon seeing her charms one would have felt almost justified in warranting her, — no cure, no pay. Perhaps she was a too-willing remedy: an overdose of even the right drug may neutralize itself. As for myself, I love Dic better because his ailment responded to no remedy.

Next day, Tom, without at all deserving it, won Rita's gratitude by taking Williams out shooting.

After supper Rita said, "My head aches, and if I may be excused, I will go to my room."

But her mother vetoed the proposition: —

"Your head does not ache, and you will stay downstairs. Your father and I are going to church, and Mr. Williams will not want to be alone, will you, Mr. Williams?"

"Indeed, I hope Miss Bays will keep me company," answered this persistent, not-to-be-shaken-off suitor.

So Rita remained downstairs with Williams and listened to his apologies for having offended her the night before. She felt contrite, and in turn told him she was the one who

should apologize, and said she hoped he would forgive her. Her gentle heart could not bear to inflict pain even upon this man who had brought so much suffering to her.

The next morning took Williams away, and Rita's thoughts were all devoted to formulating a plan whereby she might see Dic and beg his forgiveness after a fashion that would have been a revelation to Williams.

Several days of furious storm ensued, during which our Rita, for the first time in her life, was too ill to go abroad.

Mr. Bays had gone to Indianapolis with Williams, and returned on Thursday's coach, having failed to raise the three thousand dollars. At the supper table, on the evening of his return, Tom offered a suggestion.

"I'll tell you where you can get most of the money," he said. "Dic has twenty-six hundred dollars in Billy Little's box. He'll loan it to you."

"That's just the thing," cried Mrs. Bays, joyfully. "Tom, you are the smartest boy on Blue. It took you to help us out." One would have thought from her praise that Tom, and not Dic, was to furnish the money. Addressing her husband, she continued: —

"You go over and see him this evening. If he won't loan it to us after all we have done for him, he ought to be horsewhipped."

"What have we ever done for him?" asked Tom. The Chief Justice sought for an answer. Failing to find a better one, she replied: —

"He's had five hundred meals in this house if he's had one."

"And he's given us five hundred deer and turkeys if he's given us one," answered Tom.

"Well, you know, Tom, just as well as I do, that we have always been helping him. It is only your generous nature keeps you from saying so," responded Mrs. Bays. Tom laughed, and Tom, Sr., said: —

"I'll go over and see him this evening. I wonder where he has been? I haven't seen him but once since he came home."

"Guess Williams scared him off," suggested Tom.

Rita tried in vain to think of some plan whereby she might warn Dic against loaning the money, or prevent her father from asking it. After supper Tom went to town while his father went up to see Dic.

When the after-supper work was finished, Mrs. Bays took her knitting and sat before the fire in the front room. Rita, wishing to be alone, remained in the kitchen, watching the fire die down and cuddling her grief. She had been there but a few minutes when the outer door opened and in walked Dic.

"I have come to ask you if you have forgotten me?" he said.

The girl answered with a cry of joy, and ran to him.

"Ah, Dic, I have forgotten all else. Forgive me. Forgive me," she replied, and as the tears came, he drew her to his side.

"But, Rita — this man Williams?" he asked.

"I . . . I know, Dic," she said between sobs, "I . . . I know, but I can't . . . can't tell you now. Wait till I can speak. But I love you. I . . . can tell you that much. I will try to . . . to explain when . . . I can talk."

"You need explain nothing," said Dic, soothingly. "I want only to know that you have not forgotten me. I have suffered terribly these last few days."

"I'm so glad," responded the sobbing girl, unconscious of her apparent selfishness.

The kitchen fireplace was too small for a hearth log, so Dic and Rita took chairs before the fire, and the girl, regardless of falling tears, began her explanation.

"You see, it was this way, Dic," she sobbed. "He came with Uncle Jim, and then he came again and again.

I did not want him — I am sure you know that I did not — but mother insisted, and I thought you would make it all right when you returned. You know mother has heart trouble, and any excitement may kill her. She is so — so — her will is so strong, and I fear her and love her so much. She is my mother, and it is my duty to obey her when — when I can. The time may come when I cannot obey her. It has come, several times, and when I disobey her I suffer terribly and always think how I would feel if she were to die."

Dic longed to enlighten her concerning the mother heart, but could not find it in his heart to attack even his arch-enemy through Rita's simple, unquestioning faith. That faith was a part of the girl's transcendent perfection, and a good daughter would surely make a good wife.

Rita continued her explanation: "He came many times to see me, and it seems as though he grew to liking me. Then he asked me to marry him, but I refused, Dic; I refused. I should have told him then that I had promised to be your wife —" here she gave Dic her hand — "but I was ashamed and — and, oh, I can't explain after all. I can't tell you how it all happened. I thought I could; but I really do not myself understand how it has all come about."

"You have not promised him?" asked Dic in alarm.

"Indeed, I have not, and I never shall. He has tried, with mother's help, to force himself upon me, and I have been frightened almost to death for fear he would succeed. Oh, take me now, Dic. Take me at once and save me from him."

"I would, Rita, but you are not yet eighteen, and we must have the consent of your parents before we can marry. That, you know, your mother would refuse. When you are eighteen — but that will be almost a year from now — I will take you home with me. Do not fear. Give me your love, and trust to me for the rest."

"Now I feel safe," she cried, snatching up Dic's hand. "You are stronger than mother. I saw that the evening before you left, when we were all on the porch and you spoke up so bravely to her. You will meet her face to face and beat down her will. I can't do it. I become helpless when she attacks me. I am miserably weak. I sometimes hate myself and fear I should not marry you. I know I shall not be able to make you a good wife."

Dic expressed an entire willingness to take the risk. "But why did you accept a ring from him?"

"I did not," responded Rita, with wide-open eyes. "He offered me a diamond when he asked me to — to — but I refused it. I gave him back his watch, too; but mother does not know I did. She would be angry. She thinks the watch you gave me is the one he offered."

"Sukey Yates said you showed her his ring."

"Dic," returned Rita, firing up indignantly, "did Sukey tell you that — that lie? I don't like to use the word, but, Dic, she lied. She once saw your ring upon my finger, before I could hide it from her, but I did not tell her who had given it to me. I told her nothing. I don't believe she intended to tell a story. I am sorry I used the other word. She probably thought that Mr. — Mr. — that man had given it to me." After she had spoken, a shadowy little cloud came upon her face. "You were over to see Sukey Christmas night," she said, looking very straight into the fire.

"Yes," returned Dic. "How did you learn that I was there?"

"Tom told me," she answered. "And I cried right out before Mr. — Mr. — the Boston man."

"Ah, did you?" asked Dic, leaning forward and taking her hand.

"Yes; and when he put his hand on my arm," she continued, very proud of the spirit she had shown, "I just flew

at him savagely. Oh, I can be fierce when I wish. He will never touch me again, you may depend on it." She then gave the details of the scene with Williams, dwelling proudly upon the fact of her successful retreat to bed, and meekly telling of what she called her jealousy and wickedness. She had asked forgiveness of God, and now she would ask it of Dic, evidently believing that if God and Dic would forgive her wicked jealousy, no one else had any right to complain. She was justly proud of the manner in which she had accomplished the retreat movement, and really felt that she was becoming dare-devilish to a degree seldom, if ever, equalled by an undutiful daughter.

"You don't know how wicked I can be," she said, in great earnestness.

"I know how good and beautiful you are," answered Dic. "I know you are the one perfect human being in all the world — and it is useless for me to try to tell you how much you are to me. When I am alone, I am better able to realize what I feel, but I cannot speak it."

"Oh, Dic, is it really true?" asked the girl. "Neither can I tell how — how —" but those emotions which cannot be spoken in words, owing to the poverty of our language, must be expressed otherwise. God or Satan taught the proper method to Adam and Eve, and it has come down to us by patristic succession, so that we have it to-day in all its pristine glory and expressiveness. Some have spoken against the time-honored custom, and claim to mark its decadence. Connecticut forbade it by law on Sundays, and frowned upon it "Fridays, Saturdays, and all"; but when it dies, the Lord will whitewash this old earth and let it out as a moon to shine upon happier worlds where the custom still lives.

Rita and Dic did not disturb Mrs. Bays, and she, unconscious of his presence, did not disturb them until Mr. Bays returned.

When Mrs. Bays learned that Dic had been in the kitchen an hour, she felt that the highest attribute of the human mind had been grossly outraged. But her husband was about to ask a favor of Dic, and she limited her expression of dissent to an exhibition of frigid, virtuous dignity, worthy of the king's bench, or Judge Anselm Fisher himself.

When Bays came home, Dic and Rita went into the front room and took their old places on the ciphering log. Mr. and Mrs. Bays sat on the hearth before the fire. Mrs. Bays brought a chair and indicated by a gesture that Rita should occupy it; but with Dic by her side that young lady was brave and did not observe her mother's mute commands. Amid the press of other matters in the kitchen, Rita had not remembered to warn Dic not to lend her father the money. When that fluttering heart of hers was in great trouble or joy, it was apt to be a forgetful little organ, and regret in this instance followed forgetfulness. The regret came after she was seated with Dic on the hearth log, and, being in her mother's presence, dared not speak.

Mr. Bays was genuinely glad to see Dic, and listened with delight to the narrative of his trip. When an opportunity arose, Tom, Sr., said: —

"I have a fine opportunity to go into business with Jim Fisher. I want to borrow three thousand dollars, and I wonder if you will be willing to lend me your money?"

"Yes," answered Dic, eagerly, "I am glad to lend it to you." He welcomed the proposition as a blind man would welcome light. He was glad to help his lifelong friend; but over and above that motive Mr. Bays's request for money seemed to mean Rita. It certainly could mean nothing else; and if the family moved to Indianapolis, it would mean Rita in the cosey log-cabin up the river at once. Dic and his mother lived together, and, even with-

out Rita, the log house was a delightful home, warm in winter and cool in summer; but the beautiful girl would transmute the log walls to jasper, the hewed floors to beaten gold, and would create a paradise on the banks of Blue. The thought almost made him dizzy. He had never before felt so near to possessing her.

"Indeed I will," he repeated.

"I will pay you the highest rate of interest," said Mr. Bays.

"I want no interest, and you may repay the loan in one or ten years, as you choose."

Rita, unable to repress her desire to speak, exclaimed: "Oh, Dic, please don't," but Mrs. Bays gazed sternly over her glasses at her daughter and suppressed the presumptuous, forward girl. The old lady, seeing Dic's eagerness to lend the money, seized the opportunity to lessen her obligation in the transaction and to make it appear that she was conferring a favor upon Dic. If she and Mr. Bays would condescend to borrow his money, she determined that Dic should fully appreciate the honor they were doing him. Therefore, after a formulative pause, she spoke to her daughter: —

"Mind your own affairs. Girls should be seen and not heard. Some girls are seen altogether too much. Your father and Dic will arrange this affair between themselves without your help. It is purely an affair of business. Dic, of course, wishes to invest his money; and if your father, after due consideration, is willing to help him, I am sure he should feel obliged to us, and no doubt he will. He would be an ungrateful person indeed if he did not. I am sure your father's note is as good as the bank. He pays his just debts. He is my husband and could not do otherwise. No man lives who has not at all times received his dues from us to the last penny. If a penny is coming to us, we want it. If we owe one, we pay it. My father,

Judge Anselm Fisher, was the same way. His maxim was, 'Justice to all and confusion to sinners.' He died beholden to no man. Neither have I ever been beholden to any one. Dic is fortunate, indeed, in finding so good an investment for his money, at interest; very fortunate indeed."

"I don't want interest," said the too eager Dic.

"Indeed, that is generous in you," returned Mrs. Bays, though she was determined that Dic should not succeed in casting the burden of an obligation upon her shoulders. "But of course you know your money will be safe, and that is a great deal in these days of weak banks and robbers. If I were in Mr. Bays's place, I should pause and consider the matter carefully and prayerfully before assuming responsibility for anybody's money. If it should be stolen from him, he, and not you, would lose it. I think it is very kind in him to undertake the responsibility."

That phase of the question slightly dimmed its rosiness; but Dic still hoped that lending the money would make smoother his path to Rita. At first he had not foreseen that he, and not the Bayses, would rest under an obligation. To the girl the lending of this money meant Indianapolis, Williams, and separation from Dic.

THE TOURNAMENT

CHAPTER X

The Tournament

MR. BAYS, rash man that he was, without care or prayer, accepted Dic's loan and was thankful, despite the good wife's effort to convince him he was conferring a favor. Her remarks had been much more convincing to Dic than to her husband. The latter could not entirely throw off the feeling that Dic was doing him a favor.

The money was to be delivered and the note executed in ten days, Mrs. Margarita insisting that Dic should be responsible for his own money until it was needed by her husband.

"He certainly would not ask us to be responsible for his money till we can use it," she observed, in an injured tone, to her daughter. One would have supposed from her attitude that an imposition was being put upon her, though she, herself, being accustomed to bear the burdens of others, would bow her neck beneath this yoke and accept the responsibility of Dic's money. She not only convinced herself that such was the proper view to take of the transaction, but succeeded fairly well in impressing even Rita with that belief. Such an achievement required generalship of the highest order; but Mrs. Bays possessed that rare quality to a degree seldom, if ever, equalled.

The loan was to bear no interest, Dic hoping to heighten the sense of obligation in Mr. Bays. He succeeded; but of course the important member of the family still felt that

Dic was beholden to her. She could not, however, with either safety or justice, exclude from her house the man who was to lend the much-needed money. While she realized the great favor she was conferring on Dic, and fully understood the nature of the burden she was taking upon herself solely for his sake, she had no thought of shrinking from her duty; — not she. The money had not been delivered, and Dic, if offended, might change his mind and foolishly refuse her sacrifice. It might not be entirely safe to presume too largely upon his sense of obligation — some persons are devoid of gratitude — until the money was in hand. For these reasons Dic was tolerated, and during the next ten days spent his evenings with Rita, though mother and father Bays did not migrate to the kitchen, in accordance with well-established usage on Blue, and as they had done when Williams came a-wooing. Dic cared little for the infringement, and felt that old times had come again. Rita, growing bold, braved her mother's wrath, and continued each evening to give him a moment of his own. One evening it would be a drink from the well that she wanted. Again, it was a gourdful of shell-barks from the cellar under the kitchen, whence she, of course, was afraid to fetch them alone. The most guileless heart will grow adroit under certain well-known conditions; and even Rita, the simplest of girls, easily made opportunities to give Dic these little moments from which she came back rosy, while that lucky young man was far from discontented.

Rita paid each evening for Dic's moment when the door closed on him, and continued payment during the next day till his return. But she considered the moment a great bargain at the price, continued her purchases, and paid the bills on demand to incarnate Justice. The bills were heavy, and had not Rita been encased by an armor of trusty steel, wrought from the links of her happiness, her soft, white

form would have been pierced through and through by the tough, ashen shafts of her mother's relentless cruelty.

We are apt to feel pain and suffering comparatively. To one who has experienced a great agony, smaller troubles seem trivial. Rita had experienced her great agony, and her mother's thrusts were but needle pricks compared with it.

Arrangements were quickly made for moving to Indianapolis, and at the end of ten days all was ready for the money to be delivered. Dic again asked for Rita, and Mr. Bays was for delivering the girl at once. His new venture at Indianapolis had stimulated his sense of self-importance, and he insisted, with a temerity never before dared, that Dic, whom he truly loved, should have the daughter whom they each loved. But the Chief Justice would agree to nothing more than an extension of the armistice, and graciously consented that Dic might visit the *family* at Indianapolis once in a while.

After Dic had agreed to lend the money, he at once notified Billy Little, in whose strong-box it was stored. Dic, in the course of their conversation, expressed to Billy the sense of obligation he felt to the Bayses.

"I declare," vowed Billy, "that old woman is truly great. When she goes to heaven, she will convince St. Peter that she is doing him a favor by entering the pearly gates. Neither will she go in unless everything suits her. There is not another like her. Archimedes said he could lift the world with a lever if he had a fulcrum. Undiluted egotism is the fulcrum. But one must actually believe in one's self to be effective. One cannot impose a sham self-faith upon the world. Only the man who believes his own lie can lie convincingly. Egad! Dic, it would have been beautiful to see that self-sufficient old harridan attempting to convince you that she was conferring a favor by taking your money.

You will probably never see a fippenny bit of it again. And without interest! Jove! I say it was beautiful. Had she wanted your liver, I suppose you would have thanked her for accepting it. She is a wonder."

These remarks opened Dic's eyes and convinced him that the New York trip had not effaced all traces of unsophistication.

In those days of weak strong-boxes and numerous box-breakers, men hesitated to assume the responsibility of taking another's gold for safe-keeping. There could be no profit to Billy Little in Dic's gold. He took it to keep for him only because he loved him. The sum total of Billy's wealth, aside from his stock of goods valued at a thousand dollars, consisted of notes, secured by mortgages, amounting to four thousand dollars. Of this sum he had lent five hundred dollars to Dic, who had repaid him in gold. The money had been placed in Billy Little's strong-box with Dic's twenty-six hundred dollars. Each sum of gold was contained in a canvas shot-bag. Of course news of Dic's wealth had spread throughout the town and country, and had furnished many a pleasant hour of conversation among persons with whom topics were scarce.

Late one night Billy Little's slumbers were disturbed by a noise in the store, and his mind at once turned to the gold. He rose quickly, seized his shot-gun, and opened the door leading into the storeroom just in time to see two men climb out through the open window near the post-office boxes. Billy ran to the window and saw the men a hundred yards away. He climbed out and hurried in pursuit, but the men were soon out of sight, and Billy returned shivering to the store. He could see by the dim light from the window that the doors of his strong-box were standing open. There was no need to examine the box. Billy well knew the gold had vanished. He shut the iron doors and went back to his room, poked the fire, seated himself at

the piano, and for the next hour ran through his favorite repertoire, closing the concert with "Annie Laurie." Then he went to bed and slept like an untroubled child till morning.

The safe had been unlocked by means of a false key. There were no visible signs of robbery, and Billy Little determined to tell no one of his loss. The first question that confronted him in the morning was, what should be done about the loss of Dic's gold? That proposition he quickly settled. He went across the road to the inn, got his breakfast, returned to his room, donned his broadcloth coat, made thirty years before in London, took from his strong-box notes to the amount of twenty-six hundred dollars, and left for Indianapolis by the noon stage. At Indianapolis he sold the notes and brought back Dic's gold. This he kept in his iron box during the day and under his pillow at night.

The household effects of the Bays family were placed in two wagons to be taken to Indianapolis. Dic had offered to drive one team, and Tom was to drive the other. Mr. Bays had preceded the family by a day or two; but before leaving he and Dic had gone to Billy Little's store for the money. Dic, of course, knew nothing of the robbery. Billy had privately advised his young friend to lend the money payable on demand.

"You should buy a farm when a good opportunity offers," said he. "Land hereabouts will increase in value a hundred per cent in ten years. You should not tie up your money for a long time."

Billy made the same representation to Bays, and that gentleman, eager to get the money on any terms, agreed with him. Little's real, though unspoken, reason was this: he felt that if Dic held a debt against Bays, collectible

upon demand, it would be a protection against Mrs. Margarita's too keen sense of justice, and might prove an effective help in winning Rita from the icy dragoness. Therefore, the note was drawn payable on demand. When Mrs. Bays learned that fact, she named over to her spouse succinctly the various species of fool of which he was the composite representative. The satisfaction she felt in unbosoming herself was her only reward, for the note remained collectible on demand.

The weather was very cold, and the snow-covered road would be rough. So it had been determined that Rita and her mother should travel to Indianapolis by the stage coach. But when the wagons were ready to start, at sun-up, Mrs. Bays being in bed, Rita basely deserted that virtuous woman and climbed over the front wheel to the seat beside Dic. She left a note for her mother, saying that she would go with the wagon to save the seven shilling stage fare. She knew she was making a heavy purchase of "moments," and was sure she would be called upon for instant payment that night when she should meet her mother. She was willing to pay the price, whatever it might be, for the chariot of Phœbus would have been a poor, tame conveyance compared with the golden car whereon she rode.

The sun was barely above the horizon, and the crisp, cold air was filled with glittering frost dust when the wagons crossed Blue on the ice at the ford below Bays's barn. The horses' breath came from their nostrils like steam from kettle-spouts, and the tires, screaming on the frozen snow, seemed to laugh for joy. It would have been a sad moment for Rita had she not been with Dic; but with him by her side she did not so much as turn her head for one backward look upon the home she was leaving.

Dic wore a coat made from mink pelts which he had taken in the hunt, and he so wrapped and enveloped Rita

in a pair of soft bearskin robes that the cold could not come near her. He covered her head, mouth, nose, and cheeks with a great fur cap of his own; but he left her eyes exposed, saying, "I must be able to see them, you know." As he fastened the curtains of the cap under her chin, he received a flashing answer from the eyes that would have warmed him had he been clothed in gossamer and the mercury freezing in the bulb.

If I were to tell you all the plans that were formulated upon that wagon while it jolted and bumped over the frozen ruts of the Michigan road; if I were to write down here all the words of hope and confidence in the fickle future; if I were to tell you of the glances, touches, and words of love that were given and spoken between sun-up and sun-down upon this chariot of the gods — I will say of the blind god — I should never finish writing, nor would you ever finish reading.

It was: —

"You will write to me every day?"

"Yes, every day."

"You will think of me every day and night?"

"Yes, Dic, every moment, and —"

"You will come back to me soon — very soon?"

"Yes, Dic, whenever you choose to take me."

"And you will be brave against your mother?"

"Yes, brave as I can be, for your sake, Dic. But you must not forget that I cannot be very brave long at a time without help from you! Oh, Dic, how can I bear to be so far away from you? I shall see you only on Sundays; a whole week apart! You have never been from me so long since I can remember till you went to New York. I told you trouble would come from that trip; but you will come to me Sundays — by Saturday night's stage?"

"Yes, every Sunday."

"Surely? You will never fail me? I shall die of dis-

appointment if you fail me once. All week I shall live on the hope of Sunday."

"I'll come, Rita. You need not fear."

"And Dic, you will not go often to see Sukey Yates, will you?"

"I'll not speak to her, if you wish. She is nothing to me. I'll not go near her."

"No, I don't ask that. I fear I am very selfish. You will be lonely when I am gone and — and you may go to see Sukey — and — and the other girls once in a while. But you won't go too often to see Sukey and — and you won't grow to caring for her — one bit, will you?"

"I will not go at all."

"Oh, but you must; I command you. You would think I do not trust you if I would not let you go at all. I don't entirely trust her, though I am sure I am wrong and wicked to doubt her; but I trust you, and would trust you with any one."

"I, too, trust you, Rita. It will be impossible for you to mistreat Williams, associated as he is with your father. For the sake of peace, treat him well, but — "

"He shall never touch my hand, Dic; that I swear! I can't keep him from coming to our house, but it will be torture when I shall be wanting you. Oh, Dic — " and tears came before she could take her hands from under the bearskins to cover her face. But as I said, I cannot tell you all the plans and castles they built, nor shall I try.

The wise man buildeth many castles, but he abideth not therein, lest they crumble about his ears and crush him. Castles built of air often fall of stone. Therefore, only the foolish man keeps revel in the great hall or slumbers in the donjon-keep.

Early upon the second Sunday after the Bayses' advent to Indianapolis, Dic, disdaining the stage, rode a-horseback

and covered the distance before noon. Mr. Bays and Tom received him with open arms. Rita would have done likewise in a more literal sense could she have had him alone for a moment. But you can see her smiles and hear her gentle heart beats, even as Dic saw and heard them. A bunch of cold, bony fingers was given to Dic by Mother Justice. When he arrived Williams was present awaiting dinner, and after Mrs. Bays had given the cold fingers, she said: —

"I suppose we'll have to try to crowd another plate on the table. We didn't expect an extra guest."

Rita endured without complaint her mother's thrusts when she alone received them, but rebelled when Dic was attacked. In the kitchen she told her mother that she would insult Williams if Mrs. Bays again insulted Dic. The girl was so frightened by her own boldness that she trembled, and although the mother's heart showed signs of weakness, there was not time, owing to the scorching turkey, for a total collapse. There was, however, time for a few random biblical quotations, and they were almost as effective as heart failure in subduing the insolent, disobedient, ungrateful, sacrilegious, wicked daughter for whom the fond mother had toiled and suffered and endured, lo! these many years.

When Rita and her mother returned to the front room to invite the guests to dinner, Dic thanked Mrs. Bays, and said he would go to the tavern. Rita's face at once became a picture of woe, but she was proud of Dic's spirit, and gloried in his exhibition of self-respect. When Mrs. Bays saw that Dic resented her insult, she insisted that he should remain. She said there was plenty for all, and that there was more room at the table than she had supposed. But Dic took his hat and started toward the door. Tom tried to take the hat from his hand, saying: —

"Nonsense, Dic, you will stay. You must," and Mr. Bays said: —

"Come, come, boy, don't be foolish. It has been a long time since you took a meal with us. It will seem like old times again. Put down your hat."

Dic refused emphatically, and Tom, taking up his own hat, said: —

"If Dic goes to the inn, I go with him. Mother's a damned old fool." I wish I might have heard the undutiful son speak those blessed words!

Williams was delighted when Rita did not insist upon Dic's remaining, but his delight died ignominiously when the girl with tears in her eyes took Dic's hand before them all and said: —

"Come back to me soon, Dic. I will be waiting for you."

Our little girl is growing brave, but she trembles when she thinks of the wrath to come.

Dinner was a failure. Mrs. Bays thought only of the note payable on demand, and feared that her offensive conduct to Dic might cause its instant maturity. If the note had been in her own hands under similar circumstances, and if she had been in Dic's place, she well knew that serious results would have followed. She judged Dic by herself, and feared she had made a mistake.

There were but two modes of living in peace with this woman — even in semi-peace. Domineer her coldly, selfishly, and cruelly as did Tom, and she would be a worm; or submit to her domineering, be a worm yourself, and she would be a tyrant. Those who insist on domineering others usually have their way. The world is too good-natured and too lazy to combat them. Fight them with their own weapons, and they become an easy prey. Tom was his mother's own son. He domineered her, his father, and Rita; but, like his mother, his domineering was inflicted only upon those whose love for him made them unresisting.

But I have wandered from the dinner. Rita sat by Williams, but she did not eat, and vouchsafed to him only such words as were absolutely necessary to answer direct questions.

Williams was a handsome fellow, and many girls would have been glad to answer his questions volubly. He, like Mrs. Bays, was of a domineering nature, and clung to a purpose once formed with the combative tenacity of a bull-dog or the cringing persistency of a hound. Success in all his undertakings was his object, and he cared little about the means to desired ends. Such a man usually attains his end; among other consummations, he is apt to marry a rare, beautiful girl who hates him.

"Dic is like a brother to Rita," said Mrs. Bays, in explanation of her daughter's conduct. "Her actions may seem peculiar to a stranger, but she could only feel for him the affection she might give to a brother."

"Brother!" exclaimed Rita, in accent of contempt, though she did not look up from her plate. The young lady was growing rebellious. Wait for the reckoning, girl! Rita's red flag of rebellion silenced Mrs. Bays for the time being, and she attempted no further explanations.

Poor father Bays could think of nothing but Dic eating dinner at the tavern. Rita trembled in rebellion, and was silent. After a time the general chilliness penetrated even Williams's coat of polish, and only the clinking of the knives and forks broke the uncomfortable stillness. Dic was well avenged.

Soon after dinner Tom and Dic returned. Tom went to the kitchen, and his mother said: —

"Tom, my son, your words grieved me, and I —"

"Oh, shut up," answered De Triflin'. "Your heart'll bust if you talk too much. Do you want to make Dic sue us for the money we owe him, and throw us out of business? Don't you know we would have to go back to Blue if Dic

asked for his money? If you hain't got any sense, you ought to keep your mouth shut."

"Tom, you should be ashamed," said Rita, looking reproachfully at her brother.

"You shut up too," answered Tom. "Go in and talk to your two beaux. God! but you're popular. How are you going to manage them to-night?"

That question had presented itself before, and Rita had not been able to answer it.

After Mrs. Bays had gone from the kitchen, Tom repeated his question: —

"How will you manage them to-night, Sis?"

"I don't know," answered Rita, almost weeping. "I suppose Dic will go away. He has more pride than — than the other. I suppose Mr. Williams will stay. Tom, if you find an opportunity, I want you to tell Dic to stay — tell him I want him to stay. He must stay with me until Williams goes, even if it is all night. Please do this for me, brother, and I'll do anything for you that you ask — I always do."

But Tom laughed, and said, "No, I'll not mix in. I like Dic; but, Sis, you're a fool if you don't take Williams. The Tousy girls would jump at him. They were at the tavern, and laughed at Dic's country ways."

Tom lied about the Tousy girls. They were splendid girls, and their laughter had not been at Dic's country ways. In fact, the eldest Miss Tousy had asked Tom the name of his handsome friend.

Tom left Rita, and her tears fell unheeded as she finished the after-dinner work. For ten days she had looked forward to this Sunday, and after its tardy arrival it was full of grief, despite her joy at seeing Dic.

At two o'clock Williams left, and the remainder of the afternoon richly compensated the girl for her earlier troubles. Tom went out, and about four o'clock Mr. Bays

went for a walk while Justice was sleeping upstairs. During the father's absence, Dic and Rita had a delightful half hour to themselves, during which her tongue made ample amends for its recent silence, and talked such music to Dic as he had never before heard. She had, during the past ten days, made memoranda of the subjects upon which she wished to speak, fearing, with good reason, that she would forget them all, in the whirl of her joy, if she trusted to memory. So the memoranda were brought from a pocket, and the subjects taken up in turn. To Dic that half hour was well worth the ride to Indianapolis and home again. To her it was worth ten times ten days of waiting, and the morning with its wretched dinner was forgotten.

Mrs. Margarita, stricken by Tom's words, had been thinking all the afternoon of the note payable on demand, and had grown to fear the consequences of her conduct at dinner-time. She had hardly grown out of the feeling that Dic was a boy, but his prompt resentment of her cold reception awakened her to the fact that he might soon become a dangerous man. Rita's show of rebellion also had an ominous look. She was nearing the dangerous age of eighteen and could soon marry whom she chose. Dic might carry her off, despite the watchfulness of open-eyed Justice, and cause trouble with the note her husband had so foolishly given. All these considerations moved Margarita, the elder, to gentleness, and when she came downstairs she said: —

"Dic, I am surprised and deeply hurt. We always treat you without ceremony, as one of the family, and I didn't mean that I didn't want you to stay for dinner. I did want you, and you must stay for supper."

Dic's first impulse was to refuse the invitation; but the pleading in Rita's eyes was more than he could resist, and he remained.

How different was the supper from the dinner! Rita

was as talkative as one could ask a girl to be, and Mrs. Bays would have referred to the relative virtues of hearing and seeing girls, had she not been in temporary fear of the demand note. Tom was out for supper with Williams. Mr. Bays told all he knew; and even the icy dragoness, thawed by the genial warmth, unbent to as great a degree as the daughter of Judge Anselm Fisher might with propriety unbend, and was actually pleasant — for her. After supper Dic insisted that Mrs. Bays should go to the front room, and that he should be allowed, as in olden times, when he was a boy, to assist Rita in "doing up" the after-supper work. So he, wearing an apron, stood laughingly by Rita's side drying the dishes while she washed them. There were not enough dishes by many thousand, and when the paltry few before them had been dried and placed in a large pan, Dic, while Rita's back was turned, poured water over them, and, of course, they all had to be dried again. Rita laughed, and began her task anew.

"Who would have thought," she whispered, shrugging her shoulders, "that washing dishes could be such pleasant work."

Dic acknowledged his previous ignorance on the subject. He was for interrupting the work semi-occasionally, but when the interruptions became too frequent, she would say: "Don't, Dic," and laughingly push him away. She was not miserly. She was simply frugal, and Dic had no good reason to complain. After every dish had been washed and dried many times, Rita started toward her torture chamber, the front room.

At the door she whispered to Dic: —

"Mr. — that man is in there. He will remain all evening, and I want you to stay till he goes."

"Very well," responded Dic. "I don't like that sort of thing, but if you wish, I'll stay till morning rather than leave him with you."

Williams was on hand, and as a result Rita had no words for any one. There was no glorious fireplace in the room, and consequently no cosey ciphering log. In its place was an iron stove, which, according to Rita, made the atmosphere "stuffy."

Toward nine o'clock Mr. and Mrs. Bays retired, and the "sitting-out" tournament began. The most courteous politeness was assumed by the belligerent forces, in accordance with established custom in all tournaments.

The great clock in the corner struck ten, eleven, and twelve o'clock. Still the champions were as fresh as they had been at nine. No one could foretell the victor, though any one could easily have pointed out the poor victim. After ten o'clock the conversation was conducted almost entirely by Williams and Dic, with a low monosyllable now and then from Rita when addressed. She, poor girl, was too sleepy to talk, even to Dic. Soon after twelve o'clock the knight from Blue, pitying her, showed signs of surrender; but she at once awoke and mutely gave him to understand that she would hold him craven should he lower his lance point while life lasted. The clock struck one.

The champions had exhausted all modern topics and were beginning on old Rome. Dic wondered what would be the hour when they should reach Greece and Egypt in their backward flight. But after the downfall of Rome, near the hour of two, Sir Roger was unhorsed, and went off to his castle and to bed. Then Rita bade Dic good-by, after exacting from him a solemn promise to return the next Sunday.

Rita thought Dic's victory was a good omen, and drew much comfort from it. She tried to lie awake to nurse her joy, but her eyes were so heavy that she fell asleep in the midst of her prayer.

Dic saddled his horse and started home. The sharp, crisp air was delicious. The starlit sky was a canopy of

never ceasing beauty, and the song in his heart was the ever sweet song of hope. The four hours' ride seemed little more than a journey of as many minutes; and when he stabled his horse at home, just as the east was turning gray and the sun-blinded stars were blinking, he said to himself: —

"A fifty-two-mile ride and twenty-four hours of happiness, — anticipation, realization, and memory, — cheap!"

He slept for two or three hours and hunted all day long. Tuesday's stage brought a letter from Rita, and it is needless to speak of its electrifying effect on Dic. There was a great deal of "I" and "me" and "you" in the letter, together with frequent repetitions; but tautology, under proper conditions, may have beauties of its own, not at all to be despised.

Dic went to town Tuesday evening and sat before Billy Little's fire till ten o'clock, telling our worthy little friend of recent events. They both laughed over the "sitting-out" tournament.

"It begins to look as if you would get her," remarked Billy, leaning forward in his chair and resting his elbows on his knees. He was intensely jealous of Williams, and was eager to help Dic in any manner possible.

"I hope you are right, Billy Little," replied Dic. "When persons agree as do Rita and I, there should be a law against outside interference."

"There is such a law," answered Billy — "God's law, but most persons have greater respect for a legislative statute."

"I didn't know you were religious," said Dic.

"Of course I am. Every man with any good in him is religious. One doesn't have to be a Methodist, a Baptist, or a Roman Catholic to be religious. But bless my soul, Dic, I don't want to preach." He leaned forward looking into the fire, took his pipe from his mouth and, as usual, hummed Maxwelton's braes.

"If Rita were a different girl, my task would be easier," observed Dic. "She is too tender-hearted and affectionate to see faults in any one who is near to her. Notwithstanding her mother's cruelty and hypocrisy, Rita loves her passionately and believes she is the best and greatest of women. She stands in fear of her, too, and when the diabolical old fiend quotes Scripture, no matter how irrelevantly, or has heart trouble, the girl loses self-control and would give up her life if her mother wanted it. Rita is a coward, too; but that is a sweet fault in a woman, and I would not have her different in any respect. I believe Mrs. Bays has greater respect for me since I lent the money. I could see the good effect immediately."

"Her respect would not have been so perceptible had you taken a note payable in one or two years. Hold that demand note as a club over the old woman, and perhaps you will get the girl."

"Was that your reason for advising me to take the note payable on demand?" asked Dic.

"It was one of my reasons — perhaps the chief one."

"Then I'll write to Mr. Bays asking him to draw a new note payable in two years," said Dic.

Billy took a small piece of paper, wrote a line or two, and handed it to Dic, saying: —

"Sign this and deliver it to Williams when you take Bays's note due in two years."

The slip read, "Pay on demand to Roger Williams, Esq., one Rita Bays."

Dic laughed nervously, and said: "I guess you're right, as usual. After all, it is a shame that I should take her to my poor log-cabin when she might have a mansion in Boston and all that money can buy. If I were an unselfish man, I should release my claims to her." A silence of several moments ensued, during which Billy drew the leather trunk from under the bed and took a fresh letter

from the musty package we have already seen. He drew his chair near to the candle, slipped the letter from its envelope, and slowly read its four pages to himself. After gazing at the fire for several minutes in meditation he said: —

"I received a Christmas gift, Dic. It came from England. I got it this morning. It is the miniature of an old friend. I have not seen or heard from her in thirty years. I also have a letter. If you wish, you may be the only person in all the world, save myself, to read it."

"Indeed, I'll be glad — if you wish me to read it. You know I am deeply interested in all that touches you."

"I believe I know," answered Billy, handing him the letter across the table. Dic read to himself: —

——, England, 18

"My dear Friend: Each Christmas day for many years have I written a letter to you, but none of them have ever been seen by any eyes save my own. I have always intended sending them to you, but my courage upon each occasion has failed me, and none of them has ever reached you. This one I mean to send. I wonder if I shall do so? How many years is it, my friend, since that day, so full of pain, — ah, so full of pain, — when I returned the ring you had given me, and you released me to another. In your letter you made pretence that you did not suffer, knowing that I would suffer for the sake of your pain. But you did not deceive me. I knew then, as I know now, that you released me because you supposed the position and wealth which were offered me would bring happiness. But, my friend, that was a mistaken generosity. Life has been rich in many ways. I have wealth and exalted position, and am honored and envied by many. My husband is a good, kind man. I have no children and am thankful

in lacking them. A woman willingly bears children only for the man she loves. But, oh, my friend, the weariness that never ceases, the yearning that never stops, the dull pain that never really eases, have turned me gray, and I am old before my time. I fear the longing and the pain are sinful, and nightly I pray God to take them from my heart. At times He answers, in a degree, my prayers, and I almost forget; but again, He forsakes me, and at those moments my burden seems heavier than I can bear. One may easily endure if one has a bright past or a happy future to look upon. One may live over and over again one's past joys, or may draw upon a hopeful future; but a dead, ashen past, a barren present, and a hopeless future bring us at times to rebellion against an all-wise God because He has given us life. Time is said to heal all wounds; but it has failed with me, and they, I fear, will ache so long as I live. I suppose you, too, are old, though you will always be young to me, and doubtless the snow is also in your hair. I, sinful one that I am, send you with this letter, my miniature and a lock of my hair, that you may realize the great change that has been wrought in me by time. This letter I surely will post. May it take to you in the wilderness a part of my wretchedness, for so selfish am I that I would take comfort in knowing that I do not suffer alone. I retract the last sentence and in its place ask, not that you suffer, but that you do not forget. In health I am blessed beyond my deserts, and I hope the same comfort abides with you. You will hear from me never again. I have allowed myself this one delightful moment of sin, and God, I know, will give me strength against another. I wish you all the good that one human being can wish another.

"Regretfully, fondly, farewell.

"RITA."

Dic, almost in tears, returned the letter to Billy Little, and that worthy man, wishing to rob the scene of its sentimentality, said : —

"She says she supposes my hair is gray! She doesn't know I am as bald as a gourd. Here is her miniature. I'll not send her mine; she might laugh."

Dic took the picture and saw a sweet, tender face, fringed by white curls, and aglow with soft, brown eyes.

"Do you see a resemblance in the miniature to — to any one you know?" asked Billy Little.

"By George!" exclaimed Dic, holding the picture at arm's length, "Rita — her mouth, her eyes; the same name, too," and he kissed the miniature rapturously.

"Look here, young fellow," cried Billy Little. "Hand me that miniature. You shan't be kissing all my female friends. By Jove! if she were to come over here, I'd drive you out of the settlement with a shot-gun, 'deed if I wouldn't. Now you will probably change your mind about unselfishly surrendering Rita to Williams. I tell you, Dic, a fool conscience is more to be dreaded than a knavish heart."

"You are always right, Billy Little, though, to tell you the truth, I had no intention whatever of surrendering Rita to any one," returned Dic.

"I know you hadn't. Of course I knew you could not even have spoken about it had you any thought that it might be possible."

A KISS AND A DUEL

CHAPTER XI

A Kiss and a Duel

I SHALL not attempt to give you an account of Dic's numerous journeyings to Indianapolis. With no abatement in affection, the period of his visits changed from weekly to fortnightly, and then to monthly. Meantime, Williams was adroitly plying his suit; and by convincing Rita that he had abandoned the rôle of lover for that of friend, he succeeded in regaining her confidence. As agent for his father's products, he had an office at Indianapolis, and large sums of money passed through his hands. He and Tom became great cronies, for it was Williams's intention to leave no stone unturned, the turning of which might assist him in winning Rita. His passion for the girl became almost desperate at times, and her unmistakable coldness added fuel to the flame. He well knew she did not love him; but, like many another mistaken man, he believed he could teach her that great lesson if she were his wife, and could not believe that she entertained either a serious or a lasting sentiment for so inferior a person as Diccon Bright. Williams had invariably found smooth sailing with other young ladies; and head winds in Rita's case caused the harbor to appear fairer than any other for which he had ever trimmed his sails.

Soon after Rita's entrance into Indianapolis society she became popular with the fair sex and admired of the unfair; that condition, in my opinion, being an unusual tri-

umph for any young woman. To that end Williams was of great assistance. A rich, cultured society man of Boston was sure to cut a great figure among the belles and mothers of a small frontier town. The girl whom Williams delighted to honor necessarily assumed importance in the eyes of her sisters. In most cases they would have disliked her secretly in direct ratio to the cube of their outward respect; but Rita was so gentle and her beauty was so exquisite, yet unassertive, that the girl soon numbered among her friends all who knew her. There were the Tousy and the Peasly girls, the Wright girls and the Morrisons, to say nothing of the Smiths, Browns, and Joneses, many of whom were the daughters of cultured parents. If any one nowadays believes that Indianapolis — little spot in the wilderness though it was — lacked refined society during the thirties, he is much mistaken. Servants were scarce, and young ladies of cultured homes might any day be called upon to cook the dinner or the supper, and afterward to "do up" the work; but they could leave the kitchen after preparing a good meal, walk into the parlor and play Beethoven and Mozart with credit to themselves and their instructors, and pleasure to their audience. They could leave the piano and discuss Shakespeare, Addison, Dick Steele, Provost, and Richardson; and, being part of the immutable feminine, could also discuss their neighbors upon occasion, and speak earnestly upon the serious subject of frocks and frills. As to beauty — but that is a benediction granted to all times and places, creating more or less trouble everywhere.

The Tousy girls, having wealth, beauty, and numbers — there were five of them, ranging in years from fifteen to twenty-five — led the social march; and they at once placed the stamp of unqualified approval upon our little country girl from Blue. The eldest of the Tousy brood was, of course, Miss Tousy; then came Sue, Kate, and the others,

both of whom, naturally, had names of their own. Miss Tousy will soon make her appearance again in these pages for a short time. Her own romance I should like to tell you some day.

The firm of Fisher and Fox thrived famously during the first few months of their partnership, and that Tom might not be ashamed of Rita when in society, Mrs. Bays consented that she should have some new gowns, hats, and wraps. All this fine raiment pleased Dic for Rita's sake, and troubled him for his own.

The first he saw of the new gowns was on a certain bright Sunday afternoon in spring. Rita's heart had been divided between two desires: she longed to tell Dic in her letters of her beautiful new gowns, but she also wished to surprise him. By a masterful effort she took the latter course, and coming downstairs after dinner upon the Sunday mentioned she burst suddenly upon Dic in all her splendor. Her delight was so intense that she could not close her lips for smiling, and Dic was fairly stunned by her grandeur and beauty. She turned this way and that, directing him to observe the beautiful tints and the fashionable cut of her garments, and asked him if the bonnet with its enormous "poke," filled with monster roses, was not a thing of beauty and a joy so long as it should last. Dic agreed with her, and told her with truth that he had never seen a fashion so sweet and winsome. Then he received his reward, after being cautioned not to disturb the bonnet, and they started out for a walk in the sunshine.

Dic's garments were good enough, — he had bought them in New York, — but Rita's outfit made his clothes look poor and rusty. Ever since her residence in Indianapolis he had felt the girl slipping away from him, and this new departure in the matter of dress seemed to be a further departure in the matter of Rita. In that conclusion he was wrong.

The girl had been growing nearer to him day by day. Her heart belonged to him more entirely than it had even on the banks of Blue, and she longed for the sycamore divan and the royal canopy of elm. Still, she loved her pretty gowns.

"I am almost afraid of you," said Dic, when he had closed the gate and was taking his place beside her for the walk.

"Why?" asked Rita, delightedly. Her heart was full of the spring and Dic; what more could she desire?

"Your gown, your bonnet, your dainty shoes, your gloves, your beauty, all frighten me," said Dic. "I can't believe they belong to me. I can't realize they are mine."

"But they are," she said, flashing up to him a laughing glance from her eyes. "My new gown should not frighten you."

"But it does," he returned, "and you, too."

"I am glad if I frighten you," she answered, while lacing her gloves. "I have been afraid of you long enough. It is your turn now."

"You have been afraid of me?" asked Dic in surprise.

"Yes," she returned quite seriously. "I have always been slightly afraid of you, and I hope I always shall be. The night of Scott's social I was simply frightened to death, and before that night for a long, long time I was in constant fear of you. I was afraid you would speak of — you know — and I was afraid you would not. I did not know what terrible catastrophe would happen if you did speak, and I did not know what would happen to me if you did not. So you see I have always been afraid of you," she said laughingly.

"Why, Rita, I would not harm a hair of your head."

"Of course not. I did not fear you in that way. You are so strong and big and masterful; that is what frightens me. Perhaps I enjoy fearing you just a bit."

"But you are so much grander than I," returned Dic, "that you seem to be farther from me than ever before."

"Farther?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes, you seem to be drifting from me ever since you came to Indianapolis," he returned.

"Ah, Dic, I have been feeling just the reverse," and her eyes opened wide as she looked into his without faltering. There was not a thought in all their gentle depths she would not gladly have him know. A short silence ensued, during which she was thinking rapidly, and her thoughts produced these remarkable words: —

"You should have taken me long ago." Dic wondered how he might have taken her; but failing to discover any mistake, he went on: —

"I am going to New York again this spring and, — and you will be past eighteen when I return. You can then marry me without your mother's consent, if you will. Will you go home with me when I return?"

The eyes and the face were bent toward the ground, but the lips whispered distinctly, "Yes, Dic," and that young man bitterly regretted the publicity of their situation.

Soon our strollers met other young persons, and Dic was presented. All were dressed in holiday attire, and the young man from Blue felt that his companion and her friends outshone him completely. Rita was proud of him, and said as much in reply to Dic's remark when they resumed their walk.

"You might come to see me during the week, when the stores are open," she said, "and you might buy one of the new-fashioned hats. If you can afford it, you might order a long coat for Sunday. Polished shoes would look well, too; but I am satisfied with you as you are. I only suggest these purchases because you seem to feel uncomfortable."

After Rita's suggestion he did feel uncomfortable. He had earned no money since his return from New York, and Rita's fine feathers had been purchased by the proceeds of his twenty-six hundred dollars invested in her father's business. Therefore, hat, coat, and shoes were not within his reach unless he should go into debt, and that he had no thought of doing.

With her husband's increasing prosperity, Mrs. Bays grew ever more distant in her manner toward Dic. Rita, having once learned that rebellion did not result in instant death to her or to her parent, had taken courage, and governed her treatment of Williams by her mother's conduct toward Dic. Therefore Justice, though stern, was never insulting.

After Rita's suggestion bearing upon the coat, Dic, though ardently desiring to see her, dreaded to go to Indianapolis, and at that time his visits became monthly, much to Rita's grief. She complained in her letters, and her gentle reproaches were pathetic and painful to Dic.

Tom frequently visited the old home, and, incidentally, Sukey Yates, upon whom his city manner and fashionable attire made a tremendous impression. Returning home from his visits to Sukey, Tom frequently spoke significantly of Dic's visits to that young lady's ciphering log, and Rita winced at her brother's words, but said nothing. Miss Yates probably multiplied the number of Dic's visits by two or more in speaking of them to Tom, having in mind the double purpose of producing an effect upon that young man and also upon his sister. But there was too much truth in her boasting, since our hero certainly submitted himself to Sukey's blandishments and placed himself under the fatal spell of her dimples with an increasing frequency which was to be lamented. Especially was it lamented by Billy Little. Sukey was so perfect a little specimen of the human animal, and her heart was

so prone to tenderness, that she became, upon intimate acquaintance, the incarnation of that condition into which the right sort of people pray kind Providence to lead them not. The neighborhood gossips and prophets freely predicted that Rita would marry Williams, in which case it was surmised Miss Yates would carry her dimples into the Bright family. This theory Sukey encouraged by arch glances and shy denials.

Tom had become a great dandy, and considered himself one of the commercial features of the Indiana metropolis. He would have his old home friends, including Sukey, believe that he directed the policy of Fisher and Fox, and that he was also the real business brain in the office of Roger Williams, where he occupied the position of confidential clerk. He was of little real value to Williams, save in the matter of wooing Tom's sister. Tom knew that he held his clerkship only by the tenure of Rita's smiles, and Williams, by employing him, gained an ally not at all to be despised.

On a certain Monday morning, after Rita had the day previous shown marked preference to Dic, Williams said: —

"Tom, father orders me to cut down expenses, and I fear I shall be compelled to begin with your salary. I regret the necessity, but the governor's orders are imperative. We will let it stand as it is for this month and will see what can be done afterward."

This gentle hint was not lost on Thomas. He went home that day to dinner, and Rita felt the heavy hand of her brother's displeasure.

"You are the most selfish, ungrateful girl living," said Tom, who honestly thought his fair sister had injured him. Tom's sense of truth, like his mother's, ran parallel to his wishes.

"Why?" asked Rita, wonderingly. Had the earth

slipped from its axis, Tom and his mother would have placed the blame on Rita.

"Why?" repeated Tom. "Because you know I have a good position with Williams. He pays me a better salary than any one else would give me; yet you almost insulted him yesterday and went off for a walk with that country jake."

"Isn't Dic your friend?" asked Rita.

"No, of course he ain't," replied Tom. "Do you think I'd take him out calling, with such clothes as he wears, to see any of the girls?"

"I hope not," answered Rita, struggling with a smile.

"No, sir," insisted Tom, "and if I lose my place because you mistreat Williams on Dic's account, he shan't come into this house. Do you understand? If he does, I'll kick him out."

"You kick Dic!" returned Rita, laughing. "You would be afraid to say 'boo' to him. Tom, I should be sorry to see you after you had tried to kick Dic."

"Well, I'll tell you now, Sis," said Tom, threateningly, "you treat Williams right. If you don't, your big, jakey friend will suffer."

"It is on Dic's capital that father is making so much money," responded Rita. "Had it not been for him we would still be on Blue. I certainly wish we were back there."

"Your father will soon pay Dic his money," said Mrs. Bays, solemnly, "and then we will be free to act as we wish."

"The debt to Dic is no great thing," said Tom. "The firm owes Williams nearly four times that amount, and he isn't a man who will stand much foolishness. Father is not making so much money, either, as you think for, and the first thing you know, with your smartness, you will ruin him and me both, if you keep on making a fool of yourself.

But that wouldn't hurt you. You don't think of nobody but yourself."

"That has always been Rita's chief fault," remarked the Chief Justice, sitting in solemn judgment upon a case that was not before her. Poor Rita was beginning to feel that she was a monster of selfishness. Her father came feebly to her defence.

"I don't believe the girl lives," said Thomas, Sr., "who is less selfish than Rita. But Fisher and I do owe Williams a great deal of money, and are not making as much as we did at first. The crops failed last summer, and collections are hard. Williams has been pressing for money, and I hope all the family will treat him well, for he is the kind of man who might take out his spite upon me, for the sake of getting even with somebody else."

Rita's heart sank. Her father, though a weak vassal, had long been her only ally.

Had Williams not been a suitor for her hand, Rita would have found him agreeable; and if her heart had been free, he might have won it. So long as he maintained the attitude of friend and did not conflict with Dic's claims, he was well received; but when he became a lover — a condition difficult to refrain from — she almost hated and greatly feared him. Despite her wretchedness, she accepted his visits and invitations for her father's sake, and at times felt that she was under the spell of a cruel wizard from Boston. With all these conditions, the battle of Dic's wooing, though he held the citadel, — Rita's heart, — was by no means an even fight. There were other causes operating that might eventually rout him, even from that citadel.

One evening, while sitting before Billy Little's fire, Dic's campaign was discussed in detail. The young man said: —

"Rita and I are to be married soon after I return from New York. If her mother consents, well and good; if

she refuses, we will bear up manfully under her displeasure and ignore it. I have often thought of your remark about Mrs. Bays as a mother-in-law."

"She certainly would be ideal," responded Billy. "But I hope you will get the girl. She's worth all the trouble the old lady can make."

"Why do you say 'hope'?" asked Dic. "I'm sure of getting her. Why, Billy Little, if I were to lose that girl, I believe I should go mad."

"No, you wouldn't," returned his friend. "You would console yourself with the dimpler."

"Why, Billy Little, you are crazy — excuse me — but you don't understand," expostulated Dic. "For me, all that is worth possessing in the whole big universe is concentrated in one small bit of humanity. Her little body encompasses it all. Sukey Yates could be nothing to me, even though I cared nothing for Rita. She has too many other friends, as she calls them, and probably is equally generous to all."

"If you care for Rita, you should remain away from Sukey," remarked Billy. "She may be comprehensive in her affections, and she may have been — to state it mildly — overtender at times; but when a girl of her ardent temperament falls in love, she becomes dangerous, because she is really very attractive to the eye."

"I don't go there often, and I'll take your advice and remain away. I have feared the danger you speak of, but—"

"Speak out, Dic; you may trust me," said Billy. Dic continued: —

"I don't like to speak of a girl as I was going to speak of Sukey, but I'll explain. I have, of course, been unable to explain to Rita, and I'm a selfish brute to go to Sukey's at all. Rita has never complained, but there is always a troubled look in her eyes when she jestingly speaks of

Sukey as my 'other girl.' Well, it's this way: Sukey often comes to see mother, who prefers her to Rita, and if she comes in the evening, of course I take her home. I believe I have not deliberately gone over to see her three times in all my life. Sometimes I ride home from church with her and spend part of the evening. Sukey is wonderfully pretty, and her health is so good that at times she looks like a little nymph. She is, in a way, entertaining too. As you say, she appeals to the eye, and when she grows affectionate, her purring and her dimples make a formidable array not at all to be despised. You are right. She is the same to a score of men, and I could not fall in love with her were she the only girl on earth. I should be kicked for speaking so of her or of any girl, but you know I would not speak so freely to any one but you. Speaking to you seems almost like thinking."

"If it makes you think, I shall be glad you spoke," answered Billy.

"No more Sukey for me," said Dic. "I'll have nothing more to do with her. I want to be decent and worthy of Rita. I want to be true to her, and Sukey is apt to lead me in the other direction, without even the excuse on my part of caring for her. An honest man will not deliberately lead himself into temptation."

Upon the Sunday previous to Dic's intended departure for New York he visited Rita. He had made this New York trip once before, and had returned safely, therefore its terrors for Rita were greatly reduced. Her regret on account of the second expedition was solely because she would be separated from Dic for three or four months, and that bitterness was sweetened by the thought that she would have him always after his return.

"How shall I act while you are away?" she asked. "Shall I continue to receive Mr. Williams, or shall I refuse to see him? You must decide for me, and I'll act as you

wish. You know how unhappy mother will be if I refuse to see him and — and, you know she will be very severe with me. I would not care so much for that, although her harshness hurts me terribly. But mother's in bad health — her heart is troubling her a great deal of late — and I can't bear to cause her pain. On the other hand, it tortures me when that man comes near me, and it must pain you when I receive him kindly. I can't bear to pain you and — and at times I fear if I permit his attention you will — will doubt me. That would kill me, Dic; I really believe it would."

"Don't worry on that score," replied Dic, placing his hand on her heart, "there is nothing but truth here."

"I hope not, Dic," she replied. She could not boast even of her fidelity. There might be many sorts of evil in that heart, for all she knew.

"Indeed, there is not," said Dic, tenderly. "If by any chance we should ever be separated, — if we should ever lose each other, — it will not be because of your bad faith."

"But, Dic," cried Rita, "that terrible 'if.' It is the first time you ever used the word with reference to us."

"It means nothing, Rita," answered Dic, reassuringly. "There can be no 'if' between you and me. As for Williams, you must receive him and treat him kindly. Tom is his clerk, and I should hate to see Tom lose his position. Tom is a mighty good fellow. You say your father owes Williams a large debt. He might, if he chose, act ugly. Therefore, you must act prettily. Poor Williams! I'm sorry for him. We will give them all the slip when I return."

The slip came in an unexpected manner, and Dic did not go to New York.

Rita's continued aversion to Williams, instead of cool-

ing that young man's ardor, fired it to a degree previously unknown in the cool-blooded Williams family. He had visited his cultured home for the purpose of dilating upon the many charms of body, soul, and mind possessed by this fair girl of the wilderness. His parents, knowing him to be a young man of sound Mayflower judgment and worthy to be trusted for making a good, sensible bargain in all matters of business, including matrimony, readily gave their consent, and offered him his father's place at the head of the agricultural firm, in case he should marry. They were wise enough to know that a young man well married is a young man well made; and they had no doubt, judging from Roger's description, that Rita was the girl of girls.

Williams did not tell his parents that up to that time his wooing had been in vain, and they, with good reason, did not conceive it possible that any girl in her right mind would refuse their son. Roger was willing, Roger's parents were willing, Rita's parents were eager for the match; every person and everything needful were on his side, save one small girl. Roger thought that trifling obstacle would soon yield to the pressure of circumstances, the persuasion of conditions, and the charm of his own personality. He and the conditions had been warring upon the small obstacle for many months, and still it was as small as ever — but no smaller. The non-aggressive, feather-bed stubbornness of insignificant obstacles is often very irritating to an enterprising soul.

Williams was a fine, intellectual fellow, and his knowledge of human nature had enabled him to estimate — at least to approximate — the inestimable value of the girl he so ardently desired. Her rare beauty would, he thought, grace a palace; while her manifold virtues and good common-sense would accomplish a much greater task, and grace

a home. Added to these reasons of state was a passionate love on the part of Williams of which any woman might have been proud. Williams was, ordinarily, sure-footed, and would have made fewer mistakes in his wooing had his love been less feverish. He also had a great fund of common-sense, but love is inimical to that rare commodity, and under the blind god's distorting influence the levelest head will, in time, become conical. So it happened that, after many months of cautious manœuvring, Williams began to make mistakes.

For the sake of her parents and Tom, Rita had treated Williams with quiet civility, and when she learned that she could do so without precipitating a too great civility on his part, she gathered confidence and received him with undisguised cordiality. Roger, in his eagerness, took undue hope. Believing that the obstacle had become very small, he determined, upon occasion, to remove it entirely, by one bold stroke. Rita's kindness and Roger's growing hope and final determination to try the issue of one pivotal battle, all came into being during the period when Dic had reduced his visits to one month. The final charge by the Boston 'vincibles was made on the evening following Dic's visit last-mentioned.

An ominous quiet had reigned in the Williams camp for several months, and the beleaguered city, believing that hostilities had ceased, was lulled into a state of unwatchfulness, which, in turn, had given great hope to the waiting cohorts.

Upon the Monday evening referred to, the girl commanding the beleaguered forces received the enemy, whom she wished might be her friend, into her outworks, the front parlor. Little dreaming that a perfidious Greek was entering her Trojan gates, she laughed and talked charmingly, hoping, if possible, to smooth the road for her father

and Tom by the help of her all-powerful smiles. Poor and weak she considered those smiles to be; but the Greek thought them wondrous, and coveted them as no Greek ever coveted Troy. Feeling that Williams sought only her friendship, and being more than willing to give him that, she was her natural self, and was more winsome and charming than she had ever before appeared to him. Her graciousness, which he should have been wise enough to understand but did not, her winsomeness and beauty, which he should have been strong enough to withstand but was not, and his love, which he tried to resist but could not, induced him upon that evening to make an attack.

Many little items of local interest had been discussed, foreign affairs were touched upon, books, music, and the blessed weather had each been duly considered, and short periods of silence had begun to occur, together with an occasional smothered yawn from Rita. Williams, with the original purpose of keeping the conversation going and with no intent to boast, said: —

"My father has purchased a new home in Boston beyond the Common, over on the avenue, and has offered to give me his old house. He has determined to retire from the firm and I am to take his place. I shall start for Boston Christmas Day" — here his self-control forsook him — "and, Rita, if you will go with me, I shall be the happiest man on earth."

The girl remained silent, feeling that he knew her mind on the subject, and hoping he would proceed no farther. Hope, spurred by desire, is easily awakened, and Williams, misunderstanding her silence, continued: —

"I do not mean to boast, but I cannot help telling you that your home in Boston, if you will go with me, will be one of the most beautiful in the city. All that wealth can buy you shall have, and all that love and devotion can bring you shall possess. Other girls would jump at the

chance —" (poor conical head — this to this girl) "but I want you, Rita — want you of all the world."

Rita rose to her feet, surprised and alarmed by this Grecian trick, and Williams, stepping quickly to her side, grasped her hand. He had lost his wonted self-control and was swept forward by the flood of his long-pent-up emotions.

"Mr. Williams, I beg you will not — " cried Rita, endeavoring to withdraw her hand.

"You shall listen to me," he cried, half in anger, half pleadingly. "I have loved you as tenderly and unselfishly as woman ever was loved, since I first knew you. I know I am not worthy of you, but I am the equal of any other man, and you shall treat me fairly."

The girl, in alarm, struggled to free herself from his grasp, but he held her and continued: —

"No other man can give you the love I feel for you, and you shall respond to it."

"It is impossible, Mr. Williams," she said pleadingly. "You do not know all. I am sorry, so sorry, to give you pain." Her ever ready tears began to flow. "But I do not feel toward you as you wish. I — there is another. He is — has been very near to me since I was a child, and I have promised to be his wife this long time."

Her words were almost maddening to Williams, and he retorted as if he were, in truth, mad.

"That country fellow? You shall never marry him! I swear it! He is a poor, supercilious fool and doesn't know it! He has nothing in this world, and has never seen anything beyond the limits of his father's farm."

"He has been to New York," interrupted Rita, in all seriousness.

Williams laughed. "I tell you he is a boor. He is a — "

"He is to be my husband, Mr. Williams, and I hope

you will not speak ill of him," said Rita, with cold dignity.

"He is not to be your husband," cried Williams, angrily. "You shall be mine — mine; do you hear? Mine! I will have you, if I must —" he caught the girl in his arms, and pressing her head back upon the bend of his elbow, kissed her lips to his heart's content and to his own everlasting undoing. When he released her she started from the room, but he, grasping her arm, detained her, saying: —

"Rita, I beg your pardon. I lost my head. I am sorry. Forgive me."

"There can be no forgiveness for you," she said, speaking slowly, "and I wish you to let me leave the room."

"Rita, forgive me," he pleaded. "I tell you I was insane when I — I did that. You have almost driven me mad. You can surely forgive me when you know that my act was prompted by my love. Your heart is ready with forgiveness and love for every one but me, and I, more than all others, love you. I beg you to forgive me, and if I cannot have your love, forget what I have done this night and again be my friend."

After a long, painful pause, she spoke deliberately: "I would not marry you, Mr. Williams, if you were a king, or if I should die by reason of refusing you. I cannot now be even your friend. I shall tell my father and brother what you have done, and they will order you out of this house. I will tell Dic, and he will kill you!" Her eyes, usually so gentle, were hard and cold, as she continued: "There is the door. I hope you will never darken it again."

She again started to leave the room, and he again detained her. He knew that disgrace would follow exposure, and, being determined to silence her at any cost, said angrily: —

"If you tell your father, I will take from him his store, his home, his farm. He owes me more than all combined

are worth. If you will not listen to me through love, you shall do so from fear. I am sorry, very sorry, for what happened. I know the consequences if you speak of it. No one can be made to understand exactly how it happened, and I will protect myself; of that you may be sure. If you speak of what I did, driven to it by my love for you, I say I will turn your father and mother into the street. They will be penniless in their old age. Your brother Tom is a thief. He has been stealing from me ever since he came to my office. Only last night I laid a trap for him and caught him in the act of stealing fifty dollars. He took the money and lost it at Welch's gambling saloon. He has taken, in all, nearly a thousand dollars. I have submitted to his thefts on your account. I have extended your father's notes because he is your father. But if you tell any one that I — I kissed you to-night, or if you repeat what I have told concerning your father and brother, your parents go to the street, and Tom to the penitentiary. Now, do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"Will you remain silent?"

"Yes."

Then he took his hat, saying, "I have been beside myself to-night, but it was through love for you, and you will forgive me, won't you?"

"Yes."

"And I may come again?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And we will forget all that has happened this evening and you will be my friend?"

"Yes."

"If you will forgive me," he continued, recovering his senses, "and will allow me the sweet privilege of your friendship, I promise never again to speak of my love until you have given me permission. Shall it be a compact?"

"Yes," murmured the girl.

"Will you give me your hand?" he asked. She offered the hand, and he clasping it, said: —

"You have much to forgive, but your heart is full of gentleness, and you have promised."

"Yes, I have promised," she returned huskily.

"Good night, Rita."

"Good night."

The girl hurried to her room, and, almost unconscious of what she was doing, dressed for the night. During the first few minutes after she had extinguished the candle and had crept into bed, she could not think coherently, but soon consciousness came in an ingulfing flood. Williams's kisses seemed to stick to her. She rubbed her lips till they were raw, but still the clinging pollution seemed to penetrate to her soul. Her first coherent thought, of course, was of Dic. No man but he had ever, till that night, touched her lips, and with him a kiss was a sacrament. Now he would scorn her. The field of her disaster seemed to broaden, as she thought of it, and with the chastity of her lips she felt that she had lost everything worth having in life. Abandoning her pillow, she covered her head with the counterpane, and drawing her knees to her breast, lay trembling and sobbing. Dic was lost to her. There seemed to be no other possible outcome to the present situation. She feared Williams as never before, and felt that she was in his clutches beyond escape. The situation seemed hopeless beyond even the reach of prayer, her usual refuge, and she did not pray. She knew of her father's debt to Williams, and had always feared that Tom was not to be trusted. She was convinced without evidence other than Williams's words that he had told the truth, and she knew that ruin and disgrace for her father and Tom waited upon a nod from the man whom she hated, and that the nod waited upon her frown.

The next morning Rita's face lacked much of its wonted beauty. Her eyes were red and dim, the cheeks were pale and dim, her lips were blue and dim, and all the world, seen by her eyes, was dark and dim. The first thing that must be done, of course, was to tell Dic of the ravaged kiss. She had no more desire to conceal that terrible fact from him than a wounded man has to deceive the surgeon. He must be told without delay, even should he at once spurn her forever.

She feared Williams, bearing in mind his threat, and determined first to pledge Dic to secrecy, and then to tell him of her disgrace. She wrote to him, begging him to come to her at once; and he lost no time in going.

He arrived at the Bays house an hour past noon, and Rita soon had him to herself in the front parlor. When they entered the room and were alone he took her hand; but she withdrew it, saying: —

"No, no; wait till you hear what has happened."

He readily saw that something terrible had transpired. "What is it, Rita? Tell me quickly."

"I can't, Dic, till I have your solemn promise that you will never repeat what I am about to tell you."

"But, Rita —" he began, in expostulation.

"No — no, you must promise. You must swear — if you will hear."

"I promise. I swear if you wish. What can it be?"

Then she drew him to a settee, and with downcast eyes began her piteous story.

"Monday evening Mr. Williams came to call upon me. You know you said I must receive him kindly. I did so. And he again asked me to — to — you know — to marry him. When I told him it was impossible, he grew angry; and when I became frightened and tried to leave the room, he caught me by the hand and would not let me go. Then he told me again how desperately he cared for me; and

when I answered angrily and tried to escape, he held me and — and — oh, Dic, I can't tell you. I thought I could, but I can't. I — I loathe myself." She bent her head forward, and covering her face with her hands, sobbed convulsively.

"Go on, Rita. My God! you must tell me," demanded Dic.

"I know I must," she replied between sobs. "Oh, Dic, do not hate me. He held me to him as you sometimes do, — but, oh, it was so different. I was helpless, and he bent back my head and kissed me on the lips till I thought I should faint."

"The cowardly hound. He shall pay dearly for his —"

"I have your promise, your oath," said the girl, interrupting him.

"But, Rita —"

"I trusted you, Dic, and I know you will faithfully keep your promise. Father owes Williams a large sum of money, and Tom has been stealing from him." Here she began to weep. "He will ruin father and send Tom to the penitentiary if he learns that I have told you this. He told me he would, and I promised I would tell no one; but my duty to you is higher than my duty to keep my promise. Now you know why I held you off when we came in here."

"No, I don't know," he replied. "You have not promised to marry him?"

"No, no," she returned excitedly.

"Then why did you refuse me?"

"I'm not worthy to be your wife. I feel that I have been contaminated," she answered.

"No, no, girl," he cried joyfully. "It was not your fault. The falling snow is not purer than you, and truth itself is not truer than your heart. I go to New York soon, and when I return all your troubles will cease."

"They have ceased already, Dic," she murmured, placing her head upon his breast, while tears fell unheeded over her cheeks. "I thought an hour ago I should never again be happy, but I am happy already. Dic, you are a wonderful man to produce such a change in so short a time."

"I am wonderful only in what you give me," he answered.

"How beautifully you speak," she whispered; but the remainder of that interview is not at all necessary to this story.

Dic left Rita late in the afternoon and met Williams on the street down town. They could not easily pass each other without exchanging words, so they stopped and spoke stiffly about the weather, past, present, and future. Dic tried to conceal all traces of resentment, and partially succeeded. Williams, still smarting from his troubles and mistakes with Rita, and hating Dic accordingly, concealed his feelings with poor success. The hatred of these men for each other was plain in every word and act, and in a few moments, Williams, unable longer to bear the strain, said: —

"This sham between us is disgusting. Let us settle our differences as gentlemen adjust such affairs."

"Do you mean that we shall fight it out?" asked Dic.

"Yes," returned Williams. "You are not afraid to fight, are you?"

"No, and yes," answered Dic. "I have had but few fights — I fear I could not go into a fight in cold blood and — and for many reasons I do not wish to fight you."

"I supposed you would decline. I knew you to be a coward," sneered Williams, growing brave upon seeing Dic's disinclination.

"No," responded Dic, calmly looking into Williams's face, "I have nothing to fear from you. You could not stand against me even for one minute."

"But you misunderstand me," said Williams. "I do not wish to fight with my fists. That is the method of ruffians and country bullies. I am not surprised at your mistake."

Dic laughed softly and replied: "I do not know why your words don't anger me. Perhaps because I pity you. I can afford to be magnanimous and submit to your ravings; therefore, I am neither angry nor afraid."

"I propose to settle our difficulty as gentlemen adjust such affairs," said Williams. "Of course, you know nothing about the methods of gentlemen. I challenge you to meet me in a duel. Now do you understand — understand?"

Williams was nervous, and there was a murderous gleam in his eyes. Dic's heart throbbed faster for a moment, but soon took again its regular beat. He rapidly thought over the situation and said: —

"I don't want to kill you and don't want you to kill me." He paused for a moment with a smile on his lips and continued: "Suppose we let the girl decide this between us. But perhaps I am again showing my ignorance of gentlemanly methods Do gentlemen force their attentions upon unwilling ladies?"

"Oh, if you refuse," retorted Williams, ignoring his question, "I can slap your face now in the public streets."

"Don't do it, Williams," responded Dic, looking to the ground and trying to remain calm.

"Why?" Williams asked.

"Because — I will fight you if you insist, without the occasion of a street brawl. Another name might be brought into that."

"Am I to understand that you accept my challenge?" asked Williams.

"Yes, if you insist," replied Dic, calmly, as if he were accepting an invitation to dinner. "I have always supposed that this sort of an affair should be arranged between gen-

tlemen by their friends; but of course I don't know how gentlemen act under these circumstances. Perhaps you don't consider me a gentleman, and you certainly must have some doubts in your mind concerning yourself; therefore, it may be proper for us to arrange this little matter with each other."

"I suppose you would prefer seconds," returned Williams. "They might prevent a meeting."

After a few moments of silence Dic said, "If we fight, I fear another person's name will be dragged into our quarrel."

"You may, if you wish, find plenty of excuses," returned Roger. "If you wish to accept my challenge, do so. If not, say so, and I will take my own course."

"Oh, I'll accept," returned Dic, cheerily. "As the challenged party, if we were gentlemen, I believe I might choose the weapons."

"Yes," responded Williams.

"What do you suppose would be the result were I to choose rifles at two hundred yards?" asked Dic, with an ugly smile on his face.

"I should be delighted," responded the other. "I expected you to choose hoes or pitchforks."

"I think it fair to tell you," said Dic, "that I can hit a silver dollar four times out of five shots at two hundred yards, and you will probably do well to hit a barn door once out of ten at that distance. I will let you see me shoot before I definitely choose weapons. Afterwards, if you prefer some other, I will abide your choice."

"I am satisfied with your choice," responded Williams, who prided himself upon his rifle-shooting, in which accomplishment Dic had underrated his antagonist.

"We must adopt some plan to prevent people from connecting another person with this affair," suggested Dic. "If you will come down to Bays's farm for a day's hunting,

I will meet you there, and the result may be attributed by the survivor to a hunting accident."

"The plan suits me," said Williams. "I'll meet you there to-morrow at noon. I'll tell Tom I have an engagement to go squirrel-hunting with you."

Dic rode home, and of course carried the news of his forthcoming duel to Billy Little.

"There are worse institutions in this world than the duel," remarked Billy, much to his listener's surprise. "It helps to thin out the fools."

"But, Billy Little, I must fight him," responded Dic. "He insists, and will not accept my refusal. He says I am afraid to fight him."

"If he should say you were a blackamoor, I suppose you would be black," retorted Billy. "Is that the way of it?"

"But I am glad he does not give me an opportunity to refuse," said Dic.

"I supposed as much," answered Billy. "You will doubtless be delighted if he happens to put a bullet through you, and will surely be happy for life if you kill him."

"It is his doing, Billy Little," said Dic, with an ugly gleam in his eyes, "and I would not balk him. Billy Little, I would fight that man if I knew I should hang for it the next day. I'll tell you — he grossly insulted Rita Monday evening. He held her by force and kissed her lips till she was hardly conscious."

"Good God!" cried Billy, springing to his feet and trembling with excitement. "Fight him, Dic! Kill him, Dic! Kill the brute! If you don't, by the good God, I will."

"You need not urge me, Billy Little. I'm quite willing enough. Still I hope I shall not kill him."

"You hope you will not kill him?" demanded Billy. "If you do not, I will. Where do you meet?"

"He will be at Bays's house to-morrow noon, and we will go up to my cleared eighty, half a mile north. There we will step off a course of two hundred yards and fire. Whatever happens we will say was the result of a hunting accident."

Billy determined to be in hiding near the field of battle, and was secreted in the forest adjoining the cleared eighty an hour before noon next day. Late in the morning Dic took his rifle and walked down to the Bays's house. I shall not try to describe his sensations.

Williams was waiting, and Dic found him carefully examining his gun. The gun contained a bullet which, Dic thought, with small satisfaction, might within a short time end his worldly troubles, and the troubles seemed more endurable than ever before. Sleep had cooled his brain since his conversation with Billy, and he could not work himself into a murderous state of mind. He possessed Rita, and love made him magnanimous. He did not want to fight, though fear was no part of his reluctance. The manner of his antagonist soon left no doubt in Dic's mind that the battle was sure to come off. Something in Williams — perhaps it was his failure to meet his enemy's eyes — alarmed Dic's suspicions, and for a moment he feared treachery at the hands of his morose foe; but he dismissed the thought as unworthy, and opening the gate started up the river path, taking the lead. He was ashamed to show his distrust of Williams, though he could not entirely throw it off, and the temptation to turn his head now and then to watch his following enemy was irresistible. They had been walking but a few minutes when Dic, prompted by distrust, suddenly turned his head and looked into the barrel of a gun held firmly to the shoulder of our gentleman from Boston. With the nimbleness of a cat, Dic sprang to one side, and a bullet whistled past his face. One second later in turning his head and the hunting accident would have occurred.

After the shot Williams in great agitation said: —

"I saw a squirrel and have missed it."

"You may walk ahead," answered Dic, with not a nerve ruffled. "You might see another squirrel."

Williams began to reload his gun, but Dic interrupted the proceeding.

"Don't load now. We will soon reach the clearing."

Williams continued reloading, and was driving the patch down upon the powder. Dic cocked his rifle, and raising it halfway to his shoulder, said: —

"Don't put the bullet in unless you wish me to see a squirrel. I'll not miss. Throw me your bullet pouch."

Williams, whose face looked like a mask of death, threw the bullet pouch to Dic, and, in obedience to a gesture, walked forward on the path. After taking a few steps he looked backward to observe the man he had tried to murder.

"You need not watch me," Dic said; "I'm not hunting squirrels."

Soon they reached the open field. Dic had cleared every foot of the ground, and loved it because he had won it single-handed in a battle royal with nature; but nature was a royal foe that, when conquered, gave royal spoils of victory. The rich bottom soil had year by year repaid Dic many-fold for his labor. He loved the land, and if fate should prove unkind to him, he would choose that spot of all others upon which to fall.

"Is this the place?" asked Williams.

"Yes," answered Dic, tossing the bullet pouch. "Now you may load."

When Williams had finished loading, Dic said: "I will drop my hat here. We will walk from each other, you going west, I going east. The sun is in the south. When we have each taken one hundred steps, we will call 'Ready,' turn, and fire when we choose."

Accordingly, Dic dropped his hat, and the two men started, one toward the east, one toward the west, while the sun was shining in the south. Williams quickly ran his hundred steps.

Dic had counted forty steps when he heard the cry "Dic" coming from the forest ten yards to the south, and simultaneously the sharp crack of a rifle behind him. At the same instant his left leg gave way under him and he fell to the ground, supposing he had stepped into a musk-rat hole. After he had fallen he turned quickly toward Williams and saw that gentleman hastily reloading his gun. Then he fully realized that his antagonist had shot him, though he was unable to account for the voice he had heard from the forest. That mystery, too, was quickly explained when he heard Billy's dearly loved voice calling to Williams: —

"Drop that gun, or you die within a second."

Turning to the left Dic saw his friend holding the rifle which had fallen from his own hands when he went down, and the little fellow looked the picture of determined ferocity. Williams dropped his gun. Dic was sitting upright where he had fallen, and Billy, handing him the weapon, said: —

"Kill him, Dic; kill him as you would a wolf. I'm afraid if I shoot I'll miss him, and then he will reload and kill you."

Williams was a hundred and forty yards away, but Dic could easily have pierced his heart. He took the gun and lifted it to his shoulder. Williams stood motionless as a tree upon a calm day. Dic lowered his gun, but after a pause lifted it again and covered Williams's heart. He held the gun to his shoulder for a second or two, then he threw it to the ground, saying: —

"I can't kill him. Tell him to go, Billy Little. Tell him to go before I kill him."

"'KILL HIM, DIC; KILL HIM AS YOU WOULD A WOLF.'"

Williams took up his gun from the ground and started to leave, when Dic said to Billy Little: —

"Tell him to leave his bullets."

Williams dropped the bullet pouch without a command from Billy, and again started to leave. Dic tried to rise to his feet, but failed.

"I guess I'm wounded," he said hoarsely. "My God, Billy Little, look at the blood I've lost! I—I feel weak—and—and dizzy. I believe I'm going to faint," and he accordingly did so. Billy cut away the trousers from Dic's wounded leg, disclosing a small round hole in the thigh. The blood was issuing in ugly spurts, and at once Billy knew an artery had been wounded. He tore the trousers leg into shreds and made a tourniquet which he tied firmly above the wound and soon the hæmorrhage was greatly reduced. By the time the tourniquet was adjusted, Williams was well down towards the river, and Billy called to him: —

"Go up the river to the first house and tell Mrs. Bright to send the man down with the wagon. Perhaps if you assist us, the theory of the accident will be more plausible."

Williams did as directed. Dic was taken home. Within an hour Kennedy, summoned by an unwilling messenger, was by the wounded man's side. Billy Little was watching with Dic's mother, anxious to hear the doctor's verdict. There was still another anxious watcher, our pink and white little nymph, Sukey, though the pink had, for the time, given way to the white. She made no effort to conceal her grief, and was willing that all who looked might see her love for the man who was lying on the bed unconscious.

Williams remained with Bays's tenant till next day, and then returned to Indianapolis, carrying the news of the "accident."

THE LOVE POWDER

CHAPTER XII

The Love Powder

RITA was with her mother when she received the terrible news. Of course the accident was the theme of conversation, and Rita was in deep trouble. Even Mrs. Bays was moved by the calamity that had befallen the man whose face, since his early boyhood, had been familiar in her own house. At first Rita made no effort to express her grief.

"It is too bad, too bad," was the extent of Mrs. Bays's comment. Taking courage from even so meagre an expression of sympathy, Rita begged that she might go home — she still called the banks of Blue her home — and help Mrs. Bright nurse Dic. Mrs. Bays gazing sternly at the malefactor, uttered the one word "No," and Rita's small spark of hope was extinguished almost before it had been kindled.

Within a few days Billy Little went to see Rita, and relieved her of anxiety concerning Dic. Before he left he told her that Sukey was staying with Mrs. Bright and assisting in the nursing and the work.

"I have been staying there at night," said Billy, "and Sukey hangs about the bed at all hours."

Billy did not wish to cause jealousy in Rita's breast, but hoped to induce her to expostulate gently with Dic about the attentions he permitted himself to receive from the dimpler. For a minute or two his words caused a feeling of troubled jealousy in Rita's heart, but she soon dismissed

it as unworthy of her, and unjust to Dic and Sukey. To that young lady she wrote: "I am not permitted to nurse him, and I thank you for taking my place. I shall remember your goodness so long as I live."

The letter should have aroused in Sukey's breast high impulses and pure motives; but it brought from her red lips, amid their nest of dimples, the contemptuous expletive "Fool," and I am not sure that she was entirely wrong. A due respect for the attractiveness and willingness of her sisters is wise in a woman. Rita's lack of wisdom may be excused because of the fact that her trust in Sukey was really a part of her faith in Dic.

Thus it came to pass that Dic did not go to New York, but was confined to his home for several months with a fractured thigh bone. During that period Rita was in constant prayer and Sukey in daily attendance. The dimpler's never ceasing helpfulness to Dic and his mother won his gratitude, while the dangerous twinkling of the dimples and the pretty sheen of her skin became familiar to him as household gods. He had never respected the girl, nor was his respect materially augmented by her kindness, which at times overleaped itself; but his gratitude increased his affection, and his sentiment changed from one of almost repugnance to a kindly feeling of admiration for her seductive beauty, regard for her kindly heart, and pleasure in her never failing good temper.

Sukey still clung to her dominion over several hearts, receiving them upon their allotted evenings; and although she had grown passionately fond of Dic, she gave a moiety of kindness to her subjects, each in his turn. She easily convinced each that he was the favored one, and that the others were friends and were simply tolerated. She tried no such coquetry with Dic, but gladly fed upon such crumbs as he might throw her. If he unduly withheld the crumbs, she, unable to resist her yearning for the unattain-

able, at times lost all maidenly reserve, and by eloquent little signs and pleadings sought them at the hand of her Dives. The heart of a coquette is to be won only by running away from it, and Dic's victory over Sukey was achieved in retreat.

During Dic's illness Tom's heart, quickened doubtless by jealousy, had grown more and more to yearn for Sukey's manifold charms, physical and temperamental. Billy Little, who did not like Sukey, said her charms were "dimplemental"; but Billy's heart was filled with many curious prejudices, and Tom's judgment was much more to be relied upon in this case.

One morning when Sukey entered Dic's room she said: "Tom was to see me last night. He said he would come up to see you to-day."

"He meant that he will come up to see you," replied Dic, teasing her. "One of these times I'll lose another friend to Indianapolis, and when I go up there with my country ways you won't know me."

"I'll never go to Indianapolis," Sukey responded, with a demure glance. "Dear old Blue is good enough for me. The nearer I can live to it, the better I shall be satisfied." Dic's lands were on the river banks, while those of Sukey's father were a mile to the east.

"If you lived too close to the river, you might fall in," returned Dic, choosing to take Sukey's remark in jest.

"I'm neither sugar nor salt," she retorted, "and I would not melt. I'm sure I'm not sugar —"

"But sugarish," interrupted Dic.

"*You* don't think I'm even sugarish," she returned poutingly.

"Indeed I do," he replied; "but you must not tell Tom I said so."

"Why not?" asked Sukey. "He's nothing to me — simply a friend."

So the conversation would run, and Sukey, by judicious fishing, caught a minnow now and then.

During the latter days of Dic's convalescence, Sukey paid a visit to her friend Rita, and the girls from Blue attracted the beaux of the capital city in great numbers. For the first time in Sukey's life she felt that she had found a battle-field worthy of her prowess, and in truth she really did great slaughter. Balls, hay rides, autumn picnics, and nutting parties occurred in rapid succession. Tom and Williams were, of course, as Tom expressed it, "Johnny on the spot," with our girls.

After Rita's stormy interview with Williams she had, through fear, continued to receive him in friendliness. At first the friendliness was all assumed; but as the weeks passed, and he, by every possible means, assured her that his rash act was sincerely repented, and under no conditions was to be repeated, she gradually recovered her faith in him. Her heart was so prone to forgive that it was an easy task to impose upon it, and soon Williams, the Greek, was again encamped within the walls of trusting Troy. He frequently devoted himself to other young ladies, and our guileless little heroine joyfully reached the conclusion that she no longer reigned queen of his cultured heart. For this reason she became genuinely kind to him, and he accordingly gave her much of his company during the month of Sukey's visit.

One day a nutting party, including our four friends, set forth on their way up White River. At the mouth of Fall Creek was a gypsy camp, and the young folks stopped to have their fortunes told. The camp consisted of a dozen covered wagons, each containing a bed, a stove, and cooking utensils. To each wagon belonged a woman who was able and anxious to foretell the future for the small sum of two bits. Our friends selected the woman who was oldest

and ugliest, those qualities having long been looked upon as attributes of wisdom. Rita, going first, climbed over the front wheel of the ugliest old woman's covered wagon, and entered the temple of its high priestess. The front curtain was then drawn. The interior of the wagon was darkened, and the candle in a small red lantern was lighted. The hag took a cage from the top of the wagon where it had been suspended, and when she opened the door a small screech owl emerged and perched upon the shoulders of its mistress. There it fluttered its wings and at short intervals gave forth a smothered screech, allowing the noise to die away in its throat in a series of disagreeable gurgles. When the owl was seated upon the hag's shoulder, she took from a box a half-torpid snake, and entwined it about her neck. With the help of these symbols of wisdom and cunning she at once began to evoke her familiar spirits. To this end she made weird passes through the air with her clawlike hands, crying in a whispered, high-pitched wail the word, "Labbayk, labbayk," an Arabian word meaning "Here am I."

Rita was soon trembling with fright, and begged the hag to allow her to leave the wagon.

"Sit where you are, girl," commanded the gypsy in sepulchral tones. "If you attempt to pass, the snake will strike you and the owl will tear you. The spirit of wisdom is in our presence. The Stone God has already told me your fate. It is worth your while to hear it."

Rita placed her trembling hand in the hag's claw.

"No purer woman ever lived than you," began the sorceress; "but if you marry the dark man who awaits you outside, you will become evil; you will be untrue to him; you will soon leave him in company with another man who is light of complexion, tall, and strong. Disgrace and ruin await your family if you marry the light man. Even the Stone God cannot foretell a woman's

course when love draws her in opposite directions. May the Stone God pity you."

The hag's ominous words, fitting so marvellously the real situation, frightened Rita and she cried, "Please let me out," but the gypsy held her hand, saying:—

"Sit still, ye fool; sit and listen. For one shilling I will teach you a spell which you may throw over the man you despise, and he will wither and die; then you may marry the one of your choice, and all evil shall be averted."

"No, no!" screamed the girl, rising to her feet and forcing her way to the front of the wagon. In passing the witch she stumbled, and in falling, grasped the snake. The owl screeched, and Rita sprang screaming from the wagon-seat to the ground.

Sukey's turn came next, and although Rita begged her not to enter the gypsy's den, our lady of the dimples climbed over the front wheel, eager for forbidden fruit.

The hideous witch, the owl, and the snake for a moment frightened Sukey; but she, true daughter of Eve, hungered for apples, and was determined to eat.

After foretelling numerous journeys, disappointments, and pleasures which would befall Sukey, the gypsy said:—

"You have many admirers, but there is one that remains indifferent to your charms. You may win him, girl, if you wish."

"How?" cried Sukey, with eagerness.

"I can give you a love powder by which you may cause him to love you. I cannot sell it; but a gift for a gift is no barter. If you will give me gold, I will give you the powder."

"I have no money with me," answered Sukey; "but I will come to-morrow and bring you a gold piece."

"It must be gold," said the hag, feeling sure of her prey. "A gift of baser metal would kill the charm."

"I will bring gold," answered Sukey. Laden with forbidden knowledge and hope, she sprang from the front wheel into Tom's arms, and was very happy.

That night she asked Rita, "Have you a gold dollar?"

"Yes," replied Rita, hesitatingly, "I have a gold dollar and three shillings. I'm saving my money until Christmas. I want five dollars to buy a —" She stopped speaking, not caring to tell that she had for months been keeping her eyes on a trinket for Dic. "I am not accumulating very rapidly," she continued laughing, "and am beginning to fear I shall not be able to save that much by Christmas."

"Will you loan it to me — the gold dollar?" asked Sukey.

"Yes," returned Rita, somewhat reluctantly, having doubts of Sukey's intention and ability to repay. But she handed over the gold dollar with which the borrower hoped to steal the lender's lover.

Next day Sukey asked Tom to drive her to the gypsy camp, but she did not explain that her purpose was to buy a love powder with which she hoped to win another man. Sukey, with all her amiable disposition, — Billy Little used to say she was as good-natured as a hound pup, — was a girl who could kiss your lips, gaze innocently into your eyes, and betray you to Cæsar, all unconscious of her own perfidy. Rita was her friend. Still she unblushingly borrowed her money, hoping therewith to steal Dic. Tom was her encouraged lover; still she wished him to help her in obtaining the love powder by which she might acquire the love of another man. Sukey was generous; but the world and the people thereof were made for her use, and she, of course, would use them. She did not know she was false — but why should I dwell upon poor Sukey's peccadilloes as if she were the only sinner, or responsible for her sins? Who is responsible for either sin or virtue?

Rita deserved no praise for being true, pure, gentle, and unselfish. Those qualities were given with her heart. The Chief Justice should not be censured because she held peculiar theories of equity and looked upon the words "as we forgive those who trespass against us" as mere surplusage. She was born with her theories and opinions. Sukey should not be blamed because of her dimples and her too complacent smiles. For what purpose were dimples and smiles created save to give pleasure, and incidentally to cause trouble? But I promise there shall be no more philosophizing for many pages to come.

Sukey, by the help of Tom and Rita, purchased her love powder, and, being eager to administer it, informed Rita that evening that she intended to return home next morning. Accordingly, she departed, leaving Rita to receive alone the attentions of her persistent lover.

Within a week or two after Sukey's return, Dic, having almost recovered, went to see Rita. He was not able to go a-horseback, so he determined to take the stage, and Billy Little went with him as body-guard.

While they waited for the coach in Billy's back room, Williams became the topic of conversation.

"He will marry Rita in spite of you," said Billy, "if you don't take her soon. What do you say? Shall we bring her home with us to-morrow? She was eighteen last week." Billy was eager to carry off the girl, for he knew the Williams danger, and stood in dread of it. Dic sprang from his chair, delighted with the proposition. The thought of possessing Rita to-morrow carried with it a flood of rapturous emotions.

"How can we bring her?" he asked. "We can't kidnap her from her mother."

"Perhaps Rita may be induced to kidnap herself," remarked Billy. "If we furnish the plan, do you believe

Rita will furnish the girl? Will she come with us?" You see Billy, as well as Dic, was eloping with this young lady.

"Yes, she will come when I ask her," returned Dic, with confidence.

After staring at the young man during a full minute, Billy said: "I am afraid all my labor upon you has been wasted. If you are so great a fool as not — do you mean to say you have never asked her to go with you — run away — elope?"

"I have never asked her to elope," returned Dic, with an expression of doubt in his face. Billy's words had aroused him to a knowledge of the fact that he was not at all the man for this situation.

"You understand it is this way," continued Dic, in explanation of his singular neglect. "Rita does not see her mother with our eyes. She believes her to be a perfect woman. She believes every one is good; but her mother has, for so many years, sounded the clarion of her own virtues, that Rita takes the old woman at her own valuation, and holds her to be a saint in virtue, and a feminine Solomon in wisdom. Rita believes her mother the acme of intelligent, protecting kindness, and looks upon her cruelty as the result of parental love, meant entirely for the daughter's own good. I have not wanted to pain my future wife by causing a break with her mother. Should Rita run off with me, there would be no forgiveness for her in the breast of Justice."

"The girl, doubtless, could live happily without it," answered Billy.

"Not entirely happy," returned Dic. "She would grieve. You don't know what a tender heart it is, Billy Little. There is not another like it in all the world. Had it not been for that consideration, I would have been selfish enough to bring her home with me when she offered to come, and would —"

"Mighty Moses!" cried Billy, springing to his feet. "She offered to go with you?"

"Yes," replied Dic; "she said when last I saw her, 'You should have taken me long ago.'"

"And — and you" — Billy paused for breath and danced excitedly about the room — "and you did not — you — you, oh — Maxwelton's braes — and you — Ah, well, there is nothing to be gained by talking to you upon that subject. What *do* you think of the administration? Jackson is a hickory blockhead, eh? Congress a stupendous aggregation of asses. Yes, everybody is an ass, of course; but there is one who is monumental. Monumental, I say. Monu — ah, well — Maxwelton's braes are bonny — um — um — um — um — damn!" And Billy sat down disgusted, turning his face from Dic.

After a long pause Dic spoke: "I believe you are right, Billy Little. I should have brought her."

"Believe —" cried the angry little friend. "Don't you know it? The *pons asinorum* is a mere hypothesis compared to the demonstration in this case."

"But she was not of age, and could not marry without her parents' consent," said Dic. "Had I brought her home, we could have found no one to perform the ceremony."

"I would have done it quickly enough; I am a justice of the peace. I could have done it as well as forty preachers. I should have been fined for transgressing the law in marrying you without a license, but I would have done it, and it would have been as legal as if it had taken place in a cathedral. We could have paid the fine between us."

"Well, what's to be done?" asked Dic, after a long, awkward pause. "It's not too late."

"Yes, it's too late," answered Billy. "I wash my hands of the whole affair. When a man can get a girl like Rita, and throws away his chance, he's beyond hope. I supposed you had bought her for twenty-six hundred dollars — you

will never see a penny of it again — and a bargain at the price. She is worth twenty-six hundred million; but if you could not buy her, you should have borrowed, stolen, kidnapped — anything to get her. Now what do you think of yourself?"

"Not much, Billy Little, not much," answered Dic, regretfully. "But you should have said all this to me long ago. Advice after the fact is like meat after a feast — distasteful."

"Ah, you are growing quite epigrammatic," said Billy, snappishly; "but there is some truth in your contention. We will begin again. When we see Rita, we will formulate a plan and try to thwart Justice."

"What plan have you in mind?" asked Dic, eager to discuss the subject.

"I have none," Billy replied. "Rita will perhaps furnish both the plan and the girl."

Dic did not relish the suggestion that Rita would be willing to take so active a part in the transaction, and said: —

"I fear you do not know Rita. She is not bold enough to do what you hope. If she will come with us, it will be all I can expect. We must do the planning."

"You say she offered to come with you?" asked Billy.

"Y-e-s," responded Dic, hesitatingly; "but she is the most timid of girls, and we shall need to be very persuasive if —"

Billy laughed and interrupted him: "All theory, Dic; all theory and wrong. 'Deed, if I knew you were such a fool! The gentlest and most guileless of women are the bravest and boldest under the stress of a great motive. The woman who is capable of great love is sure also to have the capacity for great courage. I know Rita better than you suppose, and, mark my words, she will furnish both the plan and the girl; and if you grow supercilious, egad! I'll take her myself."

"I'll not grow supercilious. She is perfect, and anything she'll do will be all right. I can't believe she is really to be mine. It seems more like a castle in the air than a real fact."

"It is not a fact yet," returned Billy, croakingly; "and if this trip doesn't make it a fact, I venture to prophesy you will have an untenanted aerial structure on your hands before long."

"You don't believe anything of the sort, Billy Little," said Dic. "I can't lose her. It couldn't happen. It couldn't."

"We'll see. There's the stage horn. Let us hurry out and get an inside seat. The sky looks overcast, and I shouldn't like to have this coat rained upon. There's a fine piece of cloth, Dic. Feel it." Dic complied. "Soft as silk, isn't it?" continued Billy. "They don't make such cloth in these days of flimsy woolsey. Got it thirty years ago from the famous Schwitzer on Cork Street. Tailor shop there for ages. Small shop — dingy little hole, but that man Schwitzer was an artist. Made garments for all the beaux. Brummel used to draw his own patterns in that shop — in that very shop, Dic. Think of wearing a coat made by Brummel's tailor. Remarkable man that, Brummel — George Bryan Brummel. Good head, full of good brains. Son of a confectioner; friend of a prince. Upon one occasion the Prince of Wales wept because Brummel made sport of his coat. Yes, egad! blubbered. I used to know him well. Knew the 'First Gentleman' of Europe, too, the Prince of Wales. Won a thousand and eleven pounds from Brummel one night at whist. He paid the eleven and still owes the thousand. Had a letter from him less than a year ago, saying he hoped to pay me some day; but bless your soul, Dic, he'll never be able to pay a farthing. He's in France now, because he owes nearly every one in England. Fine gentleman, though,

fine gentleman, every inch of him. Well, this coat was made by his tailor. You don't blame me for taking good care of it, do you?"

"Indeed not," answered Dic, amused, though in sympathy with Beau Brummel's friend.

"I have two vests in my trunk by the same artist," continued Billy. "I don't wear them now. They won't button over my front. I'll show them to you some day."

At this point in the conversation our friends stepped into the stage coach. Others being present, Billy was silent as an owl at noonday. With one or two sympathetic listeners Billy was a magpie; with many, he was a stork — he loved companionship, but hated company.

Arriving at Indianapolis, our worthy kidnappers sought the house of unsuspecting Justice, and were received with a frigid dignity becoming that stern goddess. Dic, wishing to surprise Rita, had not informed her of his intended visit. After waiting a few minutes he asked, "Where is Rita?"

"She is sick," responded Mrs. Bays. "She has not been out of her bed for three days. We have had two doctors with her. She took seven different kinds of medicine all yesterday, and to-day she has been very bad."

"No wonder," remarked Billy; "it's a miracle she isn't dead. Seven different kinds! It's enough to have killed a horse. Fortunately she is young and very strong."

"Well, I'm sure she would have died without them," answered Mrs. Bays.

"You believe six different kinds would not have saved her, eh?" asked Billy.

"Something saved her. It must have been the medicine," replied Mrs. Bays, partly unconscious of Billy's irony. She was one of the many millions who always accept the current humbug in whatever form he comes. Let us not, however, speak lightly of the humble humbug.

Have you ever considered how empty this world would be without his cheering presence? You notice I give the noun "humbug" the masculine gender. The feminine members of our race have faults, but great, monumental, world-pervading humbugs are masculine, one and all, from the old-time witch doctor and Druid priest down to the — but Mrs. Bays was speaking: —

"The doctors worked with her for four hours last night, and when they left she was almost dead."

"Almost?" interrupted Billy. "Fortunate girl!"

"I hope I may see her," asked Dic, timidly.

"No, you can't," replied Mrs. Bays with firmness. "She's in bed, and I *hardly* think it would be the proper thing."

"Dic!" called a weak little voice from the box stairway leading from the room above. "Dic!" And that young man sprang to the stairway door with evident intent to mount. Mrs. Bays hurried after him, crying: —

"You shall not go up there. She's in bed, I tell you. You can't see her."

Billy rose to his feet and stood behind her. When Dic stopped, at the command of Mrs. Bays, Billy made an impatient gesture and pointed to the room above, emphasizing the movement with a look that plainly said, "Go on, you fool," and Dic went.

Mrs. Bays turned quickly upon Billy, but his pale countenance was as expressionless as usual, and he was examining his finger tips with such care one might have supposed them to be rare natural curiosities.

"Ah, Dic," cried the same little voice from the bed, when that young man entered the room, and two white arms, from which the sleeves had fallen back, were held out to him as the pearly gates might open to a wandering soul.

Dic knelt by the bedside, and the white arms entwined themselves about his neck. He spoke to her rapturously,

and placed his cool cheek against her feverish face. Then the room grew dark to the girl, her eyes closed, and she fainted.

Dic thought she was dead, and in an agony of alarm placed his ear to her heart, hoping to hear its beating. No human motive could have been purer than Dic's. Of that fact I know you are sure, else I have written of him in vain; but when Mrs. Bays entered the room and saw him, she was pleased to cry out: —

"Help! help! he has insulted my daughter."

Billy mounted the stairway in three jumps, a feat he had not performed in twenty years, and when he entered the room Mrs. Bays pointed majestically to the man kneeling by Rita's bed.

"Take that man from my house, Mr. Little," cried Mrs. Bays in a sepulchral, judicial tone of voice. "He broke into her room and insulted my sick daughter when she was unconscious."

Dic remained upon his knees by the bedside, and did not fully grasp the meaning of his accuser's words. Billy stepped to Rita's side, and taking her unresisting hand hastily sought her pulse. Then he spoke gruffly to Mrs. Bays, who had wrought herself into a spasm of injured virtue.

"She has fainted," cried Billy. "Fetch cold water quickly, and a drop of whiskey."

Mrs. Bays hastened downstairs, and Dic followed her.

"Get the whiskey," he cried. "I'll fetch the water," and a few seconds thereafter Billy was dashing cold water in Rita's face. The great brown eyes opened, and the half-conscious girl, thinking that Dic was still leaning over her, lifted her arms and gave poor old Billy a moment in paradise, by entwining them about his neck. He enjoyed the delicious sensation for a brief instant, and said: —

"I'm Billy Little, Rita, not Dic." Then the eyes opened wider as consciousness returned, and she said: —

"I thought Dic was here."

"Yes — yes, Rita," said Dic, "I am here. I was by your side a moment since. I came so suddenly upon you that you fainted; then Billy Little took my place."

"And you thought I was Dic," said Billy, laughingly.

"I'm glad I did," answered the girl with a rare smile, again placing her arms about his neck and drawing his face down to hers; "for I love you also very, very dearly." Billy's heart sprang backward thirty years, and thumped away astonishingly. At that moment Mrs. Bays returned with the whiskey, and Billy prepared a mild toddy.

"The doctor said she must not have whiskey while the fever lasts," interposed Mrs. Bays.

"We'll try it once," replied Billy, "and if it kills her, we'll not try it again. Here, Rita, take a spoonful of this."

Dic lifted her head, and Billy administered the deadly potion, while the humbug lover stood by, confidently expecting dire results, but too much subdued by the situation to interpose an objection.

Soon Rita asked that two pillows be placed under her head, and, sitting almost upright in bed, declared she felt better than for several days.

Mrs. Bays knew that Dic's motive had been pure and spotless, but she had no intention of relinquishing the advantage of her false position. She had for months been seeking an excuse to turn Dic from her house, and now that it had come, she would not lose it. Going to Rita's side, she again took up her theme: —

"No wonder my poor sick daughter fainted when she was insulted. I can't tell you, Mr. Little, what I saw when I entered this room."

"Oh, mother," cried Rita, "you were wrong. You do not understand. When I saw Dic, I held up my arms to him, and he came to me because I wanted him."

"*You* don't know, my daughter, you don't know," interrupted Mrs. Bays. "I would not have you know. But I will protect my daughter, my own flesh and blood, against insult at the cost of my life, if need be. I have devoted my life to her; I have toiled and suffered for her since I gave her birth, and no man shall enter my house and insult her while I have strength to protect her." She gathered force while she spoke, and talked herself into believing what she knew was false, as you and I may easily do in very important matters if we try.

"My dear woman," said Billy, in surprise bordering on consternation, "you don't mean you wish us to believe that you believe that Dic insulted Rita?"

"Yes, I saw him insult her. I saw it with my own eyes."

"In what manner?" demanded Dic.

He was beginning to grasp the meaning of her accusation, and was breathing heavily from suppressed excitement. Before she could reply he fully understood, and a wave of just anger swept over him.

"Old woman, you know you lie!" he cried. "I revere the tips of Rita's fingers, and no unholy thought of her has ever entered my mind. *I* insult her! You boast of your mother's love. You have no love for her of any sort. You have given her nothing but hard, cold cruelty all her life under the pretence — perhaps belief — that you were kind; but if your love were the essence of mother love, it would be as nothing compared to my man's love for the girl who will one day be my wife and bear my children."

The frightened old woman shrank from Dic and silently took a chair by the window. Then Dic turned to the bed, saying: —

"Forgive me, Rita, forgive me. I was almost beside myself for a moment. Tell me that you know I would not harm you."

"Of course you would do me no harm," she replied sob-

bing. "You could not. You would be harming yourself. But how could you speak so violently to my mother? You were terrible, and I was frightened. How could you? How could you?"

"I was wild with anger — but I will explain to you some day when you are my wife. I will not remain in this house. I must not remain, but I will come to you when you are well. You will write me, and I will come. You want me, don't you, Rita?"

"As I want nothing else in all the world," she whispered, taking his face between her hands.

"And you still love me?" he asked.

"Ah," was her only reply; but the monosyllable was eloquent.

Dic at once left the house, but Billy Little remained.

"I never in all my life!" exclaimed Mrs. Bays, rising from her chair. Billy did not comprehend the exact meaning of her mystic words, but in a general way supposed they referred to her recent experiences as unusual.

"You were mistaken, Mrs. Bays," he said. "Dic could not offer insult to your daughter. You were mistaken."

"I guess I was," she replied; "I guess I was, but I never, I never in all my life!"

The old woman was terribly shaken up; but when Billy took his departure, her faculties returned with more than pristine vigor, and poor, sick Rita, as usual, fell a victim to her restored powers of invective.

Mrs. Bays shed no tears. The salt in her nature was not held in solution, but was a rock formation from which tears could not easily be distilled.

"I have nursed you through sickness," she said, turning upon Rita with an indignant, injured air. "I have toiled for you, suffered for you, prayed for you. I have done my duty by you if mother ever did duty by child, and now I am insulted for your sake; but I bear it all with a contrite

spirit because you are my daughter, though God's just hand is heavy upon me. There is one burden I will bear no longer. You must give up that man — that brute, who just insulted me."

"He did not insult you, mother."

"He did, and nothing but God's protecting grace saved me from bodily harm in my own house while protecting my daughter's honor."

"But, mother," cried Rita, weeping, "you are wrong. If there was any wrong, it was I who did it."

"You don't know! Oh, that I should live to see what I did see, and endure what I have endured this day for the sake of an ungrateful daughter — oh, sharper than a serpent's tooth, as the good book says — to be insulted — I never! I never!"

Rita, of course, had been weeping during her mother's harangue; but when the old woman took up her meaningless refrain, "I never! I never!" the girl's sobs became almost convulsive. Mrs. Bays saw her advantage and determined not to lose it.

"Promise me," demanded this tender mother, rudely shaking the girl, "promise me you will never speak to him again."

Rita did not answer — she could not, and the demand was repeated. Still Rita answered not.

"If you don't promise me, I'll leave your bedside. I'll never speak your name again."

"Oh, mother," sobbed the girl, "I beg you not to ask that promise of me. I can't give it. I can't. I can't."

"Give me the promise this instant, or I'll disown you. Do you promise?"

The old woman bent fiercely over her daughter and waited stonily for an answer. Rita shrank from her, but could not resist the domineering old creature, so she whispered: —

"Yes, mother, I promise," and the world seemed to be slipping away from her forever.

THE DIMPLER

CHAPTER XIII

The Dimpler

BILLY LITTLE soon found Dic and greeted him with, "Well, we haven't got her yet."

"No, but when she recovers, we will have her. What an idiot I was to allow that old woman to make me angry!"

"You are right for once, Dic," was Billy's consoling reply. "She has been waiting for an excuse to turn you from her doors, and you furnished it. I suppose you can never enter the house again."

"I don't want to enter it, unless by force to take Rita. Why didn't I take her long ago? It serves no purpose to call myself a fool, but—"

"Perhaps it's a satisfaction," interrupted Billy, "a satisfaction to discover yourself at last. Self-knowledge is the summit of all wisdom."

"Ah, Billy Little, don't torture me; I am suffering enough as it is." Billy did not answer, but took Dic's hand and held it in his warm clasp for a little time as they walked in silence along the street.

The two disconsolate lovers who had come a-kidnapping remained over night in Indianapolis, and after breakfast Billy suggested that they discuss the situation in detail.

"Have you thought of any plan whereby you may communicate with Rita?" he asked.

"No," answered Dic.

"Do you know any of her girl friends?"

"The very thing!" exclaimed Dic, joyous as possible under the circumstances. "I'll see Miss Tousy, and she will help us, I'm sure."

"Is she sentimentally inclined?" queried Billy.

"I don't know."

"Is her face round or oval?"

"Oval," replied Dic, in some perplexity.

"Long oval?"

"Rather."

"Good!" exclaimed Billy. "Does she talk much or little?"

"Little, save at times."

"And her voice?"

"Low and soft."

"Better and better," said Billy. "What does she read?"

"She loves Shakespeare and Shelley."

"Go to her at once," cried Billy, joyfully "I'll stake my life she'll help. Show me a long oval face, a soft voice speaking little, and a lover of poetry, and I'll show you the right sort of heart. But we must begin at once. Buy a new stock, Dic, and have your shoes polished. Get a good pair of gloves, and, if you think you can handle it properly, a stick. Fine feathers go farther in making fine birds than wise men suppose. Too much wisdom often blinds a man to small truths that are patent to a fool. I wish you were small enough to wear my coat."

Dic congratulated himself upon his bulk, but he took Billy's advice regarding the gloves and stock. Billy was a relic of the days of the grand beaux, when garments, if they did not make the man, at least could mar the gentleman, and held his faith in the omnipotence of dress, as a heritage from his youth — that youth which was almost of another world. Dic was one of the few men whose splendor of person did not require the adornments of dress. All women looked upon his redolence of life and strength

with pleasure, and soon learned to respect his straightforward, fearless honesty. Miss Tousy had noted Dic's qualities on previous occasions, and valued him accordingly. She was also interested in Rita, who was her protégée; and she was graciousness itself to Dic that day as she asked him,

"What good fortune brings you?"

"It is bad fortune brings me, I am sorry to say," returned Dic. "Yesterday was the unluckiest day of my life, and I have come to you for help."

Miss Tousy's kind heart responded, as Billy Little had predicted.

"Then your ill luck is my good fortune. In what way can I help you? I give you *carte blanche;* ask what you will."

"I will not hold you to your offer until I tell you what I want. Then you may refuse if you feel that — "

"I'll not refuse," answered the kindly young lady. "Go on."

"You know that Ri—, Miss Bays, is — has been for a long time — that is, has promised to be — "

"I know. But what has happened?"

"It's a long story. I'll not tell you all. I — "

"Yes, tell me all — that is, if you wish. I'm eager to hear all, even to the minutest details. Don't mind if the story is long." And she settled herself comfortably among the cushions to hear his sentimental narrative. Dic very willingly told the whole story of yesterday's woes, and Miss Tousy gave him her sympathy, as only a woman can give. It was not spoken freely in words, merely in gestures and little ejaculatory "ah's," "oh's," and "too bad's"; but it was soothing to Dic, and sweet Miss Tousy gained a life-long friend.

"You see," said Dic, after he had finished his story, "I cannot communicate with Rita. She is ill, and I shall be unable to hear from her."

"I'll keep you informed; indeed I will, gladly. Oh, that hard old woman! There is no hallucination so dangerous to surrounding happiness as that of the Pharisee. Mrs. Bays has in some manner convinced herself that her hardness is goodness, and she actually imposes the conviction upon others. Her wishes have come to bear the approval of her conscience. Every day of my life I grow more thankful that I have a sweet, gentle mother. But Mrs. Bays intends right, and that, perhaps, is a saving grace."

"I prefer a person who intends wrong and does right to one who intends right and does wrong," replied Dic. "I know nothing so worthless and contemptible as mistaken good intentions. But we should not criticise Rita's mother."

"No," returned Miss Tousy; "and I'll go to see Rita every day — twice a day — and will write to you fully by every mail."

"I intend to remain at the inn till she recovers. I couldn't wait for the mail."

"Very well, that is much better. I'll send you word to the inn after each visit, or, if you wish, you may come to me evenings, and I'll tell you all about her. Shall I see you to-night, and shall I carry any message?"

"Tell her I will remain till she is better, and — and then I — I will — that will be all for the present."

Billy Little was for going home at noon, but Dic begged him to remain. The day was very long for Dic, notwithstanding Billy's companionship, and twice during the afternoon he induced his friend to exhibit the Brummel coat at the street-crossing a short distance south of the house wherein the girl of girls lay ill and grieving. After much persuasion, Billy consented to accompany Dic on his visit

that evening to Miss Tousy. The Schwitzer coat was carefully brushed, the pale face was closely shaved and delicately powdered, and the few remaining hairs were made to do the duty of many in covering Billy's blushing baldness.

"I wish I had one of my waistcoats here," said our little coxcomb. "I would button it if I had to go into stays — egad! I would. I will show you those waistcoats some day, — India silk — corn color, with a touch of gold braid at the pockets, ivory buttons the size of a sovereign, with gold centres, made by the artist who made the coat. The coat is all right. Wouldn't be ashamed to wear it to a presentation. I will button it over this waistcoat and it will not be noticed. How do you like this stock — all right?"

"I think it is."

"I have a better one at home. Got it down by the bank. Smith, Dye and Company, Limited, Haberdashers. I can recommend the place if — if you ever go to London. Brummel's haberdasher — Brummel knew the best places. Depend upon him for that. Where he dealt, there you would hear the tramp of many feet. He made Schwitzer's fortune. Wonderful man, Brummel. Wonderful man, and I like him if he does owe me a thousand pounds thirty years past due. Egad! it has been so long since I carried a stick I have almost lost the knack of the thing. A stick is a useful thing to a gentleman. Gives him grace, furnishes occupation for his hands. Gloves in one hand, stick in the other — no man need get his hands mixed. Got this stick down on Washington Street an hour ago. How do I seem to handle it?" He walked across the room, holding the stick in the most approved fashion — of thirty years before.

"It's fine, Billy Little, it's fine," answered Dic, sorry to see an apparent weakness in his little friend, though loving

him better for the sake of it. The past had doubled back on Billy for a day, and he felt a touch of his youth — of that olden time when the first dandy of England was heir-apparent to the crown and blubbered over an ill-fitting coat. If you will look at the people of those times through the lens of that fact, you will see something interesting and amusing.

After many glances toward the mirror, Billy announced that he was ready, and marched upon Miss Tousy, exulting in the fact that there was not in all the state another coat like the one he wore. Billy's vanity, to do him justice, was not at all upon his own account. He wished to appear well for Dic's sake, and ransacked his past life for points in etiquette and manner once familiar, but now almost forgotten by him and by the world. His quaint old resurrections were comical and apt to create mirth, but beneath their oddities I believe a discerning person would easily have recognized the gentleman.

I shall not describe to you Billy's Regency bow when Dic presented him to Miss Tousy; nor shall I bring into his conversation all the "My dear madams," "Dear ladys," and "Beg pardons," scattered broadcast in his effort to do credit to his protégé. But Miss Tousy liked Billy, while she enjoyed his old-fashioned affectations; and in truth the man was in all respects worthy of the coat.

"Rita is very ill," Miss Tousy said. "Mrs. Bays says your conduct almost killed her daughter. Two doctors are with her now."

"Terrible, my dear madam, terrible," interrupted Billy, and Miss Tousy continued: —

"I whispered to Rita that you would remain, and she murmured, 'I'm so glad. Tell him mother forced me to promise that I would never see him again, and that promise is killing me. I can't forget it even for a moment. Ask him to forgive me, and ask him if it will be wrong for me

to break the promise when I get well. I cannot decide whether it would be wrong for me to keep it or to break it. Both ways seem wicked to me!'"

"Wicked!" cried Billy springing from his chair excitedly, and walking across the room, gloves in one hand, stick in the other, and Brummel coat buttoned tightly across the questionable waistcoat, "my dear lady, tell her it will be wicked — damnable — beg pardon, beg pardon; but I must repeat, dear lady, it will be wicked and wrong — a damning wrong, if she keeps the promise obtained by force — by force, lady, by duress. Tell her I absolve her from the promise. I will go to Rome and get the Pope's absolution. No! that will be worse than none for Rita; she is a Baptist. Well, well, I'll hunt out the head Baptist, — the high chief of all Baptists, if there is one, — and will get his absolution. But, my dear Miss Tousy, she has faith in me. I have never led her wrong in my life, and she knows it. Tell her I say the promise is not binding, before either God or man, and you will help her."

"And tell her she will not be able to keep the promise," interrupted Dic. "I'll make it impossible. When she recovers, I'll kidnap her, if need be."

"I'll go at once and tell her," returned Miss Tousy. "She is in need of those messages."

Dic and Billy walked down to Bays's with Miss Tousy, and waited on the corner till she emerged from the house, when they immediately joined her.

"I gave her the messages," said Miss Tousy, "and she became quieter at once. 'Tell him I'll get well now,' she whispered. Then she smiled faintly, and said, 'Wouldn't it be romantic to be kidnapped?' After that she was silent; and within five minutes she slept, for the first time since yesterday."

Rita's illness proved to be typhoid fever, a frightful disease in those days of bleeding and calomel.

Billy returned home after a few days, but Dic remained to receive his diurnal report from Miss Tousy.

One evening during the fourth week of Rita's illness Dic received the joyful tidings that the fever had subsided, and that she would recover. He spent a great part of the night watching her windows from across the street, as he had spent many a night before.

On returning to the inn he found a letter from Sukey Yates. He had been thinking that the fates had put aside their grudge against him, and that his luck had turned. When he read the letter announcing that the poor little dimpler was in dire tribulation, and asking him to return to her at once and save her from disgrace, he still felt that the fates had changed — but for the worse. He was sure Sukey might, with equal propriety, make her appeal to several other young men — especially to Tom Bays; but he was not strong enough in his conviction to relieve himself of blame, or entirely to throw off a sense of responsibility. In truth, he had suffered for weeks with an excruciating remorse; and the sin into which he had been tempted had been resting like lead upon his conscience. He remembered Billy's warning against Sukey's too seductive charms; and although he had honestly tried to follow the advice, and had clearly seen the danger, he had permitted himself to be lured into a trap by a full set of dimples and a pair of moist, red lips. He was not so craven as to say, even to himself, that Sukey was to blame; but deep in his consciousness he knew that he had tried not to sin; and that Sukey, with her allurements, half childish, half-womanly, and all-enticing, had tempted him, and he had eaten. The news in her letter entirely upset him. For a time he could not think coherently. He had never loved Sukey, even for a moment. He could not help admiring her physical beauty. She was a perfect specimen of her type, and her too affectionate heart and

joyous, never-to-be-ruffled good humor made her a delightful companion, well fitted to arouse tenderness. Add virtue and sound principle to Sukey's other attractions, and she would have made a wife good enough for a king — too good, far too good. For the lack of those qualities she was not to blame, since they spring from heredity or environment. Sukey's parents were good, honest folk, but wholly unfitted to bring up a daughter. Sukey at fourteen was quite mature, and gave evidence of beauty so marked as to attract men twice her age, who "kept company" with her, as the phrase went, sat with her till late in the night, took her out to social gatherings, and — God help the girl, she was not to blame. She did only as others did, as her parents permitted; and her tender little heart, so prone to fondness, proved to be a curse rather than the blessing it would have been if properly directed and protected. Mentally, physically, and temperamentally she was very close to nature, and nature, in the human species, needs curbing.

The question of who should bear the blame did not enter into Dic's perturbed cogitations. He took it all upon his own broad shoulders, and did not seek to hide his sin under the cloak of that poor extenuation, "she did tempt me." If Rita's love should turn to hatred (he thought it would), he would marry Sukey and bear his burden through life; but if Rita's love could withstand this shock, Sukey's troubles would go unrighted by him. Those were the only conclusions he could reach. His keen remorse was the result of his sin; and while he pitied Sukey, he did not trust her.

Next morning Dic saw Miss Tousy and took the stage for home. His first visit was to Billy Little, whom he found distributing letters back of the post-office boxes.

"How is Rita?" asked Billy.

"She's much better," returned Dic. "Miss Tousy tells

me the fever has left her, and the doctors say she will soon recover. I wanted to see her before I left, but of course that could not be; and — and the truth is I could not have looked her in the face."

"Why?" Billy was busy throwing letters.

"Because — because, Billy Little, I am at last convinced that I represent the most perfect combination of knave and fool that ever threw heaven away and walked open-eyed into hell."

"Oh, I don't know," replied the postmaster, continuing to toss letters into their respective boxes. "I . . . don't know. The world has seen some rare (Mrs. Sarah Cummins) combinations of that sort." After a long pause he continued: "I . . . I don't believe (Peter Davidson) I don't believe . . . there is much knave in you. Fool, perhaps (Atkinson, David. He doesn't live here), in plenty — ." Another pause, while three or four letters were distributed. "Suppose you say that the formula — the chemical formula — of your composition would stand (Peter Smith) F_9 K_2. Of course, at times, you are all M, which stands for man, but (Jane Anderson, Jane Anderson. Jo John's wife, I suppose) — "

"You will not jest, Billy Little, when you have heard all."

"I am not . . . jesting now. Go back . . . into my apartments. I'll lock the door (Samuel Richardson. Great writer) and come back to you (Leander Cross. Couldn't read a signboard. What use writing letters to him?) when I have handed (Mrs. Margarita Bays. They don't know she has moved to Indianapolis, damn her) — when I have handed out the mail."

Dic went back to the bedroom, and Billy opened the delivery window. The little crowd scrambled for their letters as if they feared a delay of a moment or two would fade the ink, and when the mail had been distributed the

calm postmaster went back to hear Dic's troubles. At no time in that young man's life had his troubles been so heavy. He feared Billy Little's scorn and biting sarcasm, though he well knew that in the end he would receive sympathy and good advice. The relation between Dic and Billy was not only that of intimate friendship; it was almost like that between father and son. Billy felt that it was not only his privilege, but his duty, to be severe with the young man when necessity demanded. When Dic was a boy he lost his father, and Billy Little had stood as substitute for, lo, these many years.

When Billy entered the room, Dic was lost amid the flood of innumerable emotions, chief among which were the fear that he had lost Rita and the dread of her contempt.

Billy went to the fireplace, poked the fire, lighted his pipe, and leaned against the mantel-shelf.

"Well, what's the trouble now?" asked Brummel's friend.

"Read this," answered Dic, handing him Sukey's letter.

Billy went to the window, rested his elbows upon the piano, put on his "other glasses," and read aloud: —

"'Dear Dic: I'm in so much trouble.'" ("Maxwelton's braes," exclaimed Billy. The phrase at such a time was almost an oath.) "'Please come to me at once.'" (Billy turned his face toward Dic and gazed at him for thirty long seconds.) "'Come at once. Oh, please come to me, Dic. I will kill myself if you don't. I cannot sleep nor eat. I am in such agony I wish I were dead; but I trust you, and I am sure you will save me. I know you will. If you could know how wretched and unhappy I am, if you could see me tossing all night in bed, and crying and praying, you certainly would pity me. Oh, God, I will go crazy. I know I will. Come to me, Dic, and save me. I

have never said that I loved you — you have never asked me — but you know it more surely than words can tell.

"'SUKEY.'"

When Billy had finished reading the letter he spoke two words, as if to himself, — "Poor Rita." His first thought was of her. Her pain was his pain; her joy was his joy; her agony was his torture. Then he seated himself on the stool and gazed across the piano out the window. After a little time his fingers began to wander over the keys. Soon the wandering fingers began to strike chords, and the random chords grew into soft, weird improvisations; then came a few chords from the beloved, melodious "Messiah"; but as usual "Annie Laurie" soon claimed her own, and Billy was lost, for the time, to Dic and to the world. Meanwhile Dic sat by the fireplace awaiting his friend's pleasure, and to say that he suffered, but poorly tells his condition.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" asked Billy, suddenly turning on the stool. Dic did not answer, and Billy continued: "Damned pretty mess you've made. Proud of yourself, I suppose?"

"No."

"Lady-killer, eh?"

"No."

"Oh, perhaps it wasn't your fault, Adam? You are not to blame? She tempted you?"

"I only am to blame."

"'Deed if I believe you have brains enough to know who is to blame."

"Yes, I have that much, but no more. Oh, Billy Little, don't — don't." Billy turned upon the piano-stool, and again began to play.

Dic had known that Billy would be angry, but he was not prepared for this avalanche of wrath. Billy had grown

desperately fond of Rita. No one could know better than he the utter folly and hopelessness of his passion; but the realization of folly and a sense of hopelessness do not shut folly out of the heart. If they did, there would be less suffering in the world. Billy's love was a strange combination of that which might be felt by a lover and a father. He had not hoped or desired ever to possess the girl, and his love for Dic had made it not only easy, but joyous to surrender her to him. Especially was he happy over the union because it would insure her happiness. His love was so unselfish that he was willing to give up not only the girl, but himself, his blood, his life, for her sweet sake. With all his love for Dic, that young man was chiefly important as a means to Rita's happiness, and now he had become worse than useless because he was a source of wretchedness to her. You may understand, then, the reason for Billy's extreme anger against this young man, who since childhood had been his friend, almost as dear as if he were his son.

After rambling over the keys for two or three minutes, he turned savagely upon Dic, saying:—

"I wish you would tell me why you come to me for advice. You don't take it."

"Yes, I do, Billy Little. I value your advice above every one else's."

"Stuff and nonsense. I warned you against that girl—the dimpler: much you heeded me. Do you think I'm a free advice factory? Get out of here, get out of here, I say, and let me never see your face—"

"Oh, Billy Little, don't, don't," cried Dic. "You can't forsake me after all these years you have helped me. You can't do it, Billy Little!"

"Get out of here, I say, and don't come back—" ("Ah, Billy Little, I beg—") "till to-morrow morning. Come to-morrow, and I will try to tell you what to do." Dic rushed

upon the terrible little fellow, clasped his small form with a pair of great strong arms, and ran from the room. Billy sat for a moment gazing at the door through which Dic had passed; then he arranged his stock, and turned to his piano for consolation and inspiration.

Billy knew that he knew Dic, and believed he knew Sukey. He knew, among other facts concerning Dic, that he was not a libertine; that he was pure in mind and purpose; that he loved and revered Rita Bays; and that he did not care a pin for Sukey's manifold charms of flesh and blood. He believed that Sukey was infatuated with Dic, and that her fondness grew partly out of the fact that he did not fall before her smiles. He also believed that her regard for Dic did not preclude, in her comprehensive little heart, great tenderness for other men. Sukey had, upon one occasion, been engaged to marry three separate and distinct swains of the neighborhood, and a triangular fight among the three suitors had aroused in the breast of her girl friends a feeling of envy that was delicious to the dimpling little *casus belli*. After Dic's departure, Billy sat throughout most of the night gazing into the fire, smoking his pipe, and turning the situation over in his mind. When Dic arrived next morning he was seated on the counter ready with his advice. The young man took a seat beside him.

"Now tell me all about it," said Billy. "I think I know, but tell me the exact truth. Don't spare the dimpler, and don't spare yourself."

Thereupon Dic unfolded his story with a naked truthfulness that made him blush.

"I thought as much," remarked Billy, when the story was finished. "Miss Potiphar from Egypt has brought you and herself into trouble."

"No, no, Billy Little, you are wrong. I cannot escape blame by placing the fault upon her. I should despise

myself if I did; but I would be a blind fool not to see that — that — oh, I cannot explain. You know there are Jap Bertram, Dick Olders, Tom Printz, and, above all, Tom Bays, who are her close friends and constant visitors and — and, you know — you understand my doubts. I do not trust her. I may be wrong, but I suppose I should wish to err on the right side. It is better that I should err in trusting her than to be unjust in doubting her. The first question is: Shall I marry Sukey if Rita will forgive me? The second, Shall I marry her if Rita refuses to forgive me? Am I bound by honor and duty to sacrifice my happiness for the sake of the girl whom I do not, but perhaps should, trust?"

"I don't see that your happiness has anything to do with the case," returned Billy. "If that alone were to be considered, I should say marry Sukey regardless of your doubts. You deserve the penalty; but Rita has done no sin, and you have no right to punish her to pay your debts. You are bound by every tie of honor to marry her, and you shall do so. The dimpler is trying to take you from Rita, and if you are not careful your fool conscience will help her to do it."

"If Rita will forgive me," said Dic.

"She'll forgive you sooner or later," answered Billy. "Her love and forgiveness are benedictions she cannot withhold nor you escape."

I doubt if Billy Little would have been so eager in forwarding this marriage had not Williams been frowning in the background. Billy, as you know, had a heart of his own — a bachelor heart; but he hated Williams, and was intensely jealous of him. So, taking the situation at its worst, Dic was the lesser of two evils. But, as I have already told you many times, he passionately loved Dic for his own sake, and his unselfish regard for the priceless girl made the young man doubly valuable as a means

to her happiness. If Rita wanted a lover, she must have him. If she wanted the moon, she ought to have it — should have it, if Billy Little could get it for her. So felt Billy, whose advice brought joy to Dic. It also brought to him the necessity of a painful interview with Sukey. He dreaded the interview, and told Billy he thought he would write to Sukey instead.

"You can pay at least a small part of the penalty you owe by seeing the girl and bearing the pain of an interview," replied Billy. "But if you are too cowardly to visit her, write. I suppose that's what I should do if I were in your place. But I'd be a poor example for a manly man to follow."

"I'll see her," replied Dic. "Poor Sukey! I pity her."

"It isn't safe to pity a girl like Sukey. Pity has a dangerous kinsman," observed Billy.

On his way home, Dic called upon Sukey, and, finding her out, left word he would return that evening. When she received the message her heart throbbed with hope, and the dimples twinkled joyously for the first time in many days. She used all the simple arts at her command to adorn herself for his reception, and toiled to assist the dimples in the great part they would soon be called upon to play in the drama of her life. She knew that Dic did not trust her, and from that knowledge grew her own doubts as to the course he would take. Hope and fear warmed and chilled her heart by turns; but her efforts to display her charms were truly successful; and faith, born of man's admiration, led her to believe she would that night win the greatest prize the world had to offer, and would save herself from ruin and disgrace.

Soon after supper the family were relegated to the kitchen, and Sukey, with palpitating heart, waited in the front room for Dic.

Among our simple rural folk a décolleté gown was considered immodest. In order to be correct the collar must cover the throat, as nearly to the chin and ears as possible. Sukey's dresses were built upon this plan, much to her regret; for her throat and bosom were as white and plump —but never mind the description. They suited Sukey, and so far as I have ever heard they were entirely satisfactory to those so fortunate as to behold them. Therefore, when she was alone, knowing well the inutility of the blushing rose unseen, she opened the dress collar and tucked it under at each side, displaying her rounded white throat, with its palpitating little spot — almost another dimple — where it merged into the bosom. There was no immodest exposure, but when Mrs. Yates returned to the room for her glasses, the collar was quickly readjusted and remained in place till Dic's step was heard. Now, ready, and all together: dimples, lips, teeth, eyes, and throat, do your duty! So much depended upon Dic that she wanted to fall upon her knees when he entered. It grieves me to write thus of our poor, simple little girl, whose faults were thrust upon her, and I wish I might have told this story with reference only to her dimples and her sweetness; but Dic shall not be hopelessly condemned for his sin, if I can prevent it, save by those who are entitled to cast stones, and to prevent such condemnation I must tell you the truth about Sukey. The fact that he would not claim the extenuation of temptation is at least some reason why he should have it.

I shall not tell you the details of this interview. Soon after Dic's arrival our little Hebe was in tears, and he, moved by her suffering, could not bring himself to tell her his determination. Truly, Billy was right. It was dangerous to pity such a girl. Dic neither consented nor refused to marry her, but weakly evaded the subject, and gave her the impression that he would comply with her wishes. He did not intend to create that impression; but in her ardent

desire she construed his silence to suit herself, and, becoming radiant with joy, was prettier and more enticing than she had ever before appeared. Therefore, as every man will agree, Dic's task became difficult in proportion, and painful beyond his most gloomy anticipations. His weakness grew out of a great virtue — the wholesome dread of inflicting pain.

During the evening Sukey offered Dic a cup of cider, and her heart beat violently while he drank.

"It has a peculiar taste," he remarked.

"There are crab apples in it," the girl answered.

There was something more than crab apples in the cider; there was a love powder, and two hours after Dic's arrival at home he became ill. Dr. Kennedy ascribed the illness to poisoning, and for a time it looked as if Sukey's love powder would solve several problems; but Dic recovered, and the problems were still unsolved.

From the day Dic received Sukey's unwelcome letter, he knew it was his duty to inform Rita of his trouble. He was sure she would soon learn the interesting truth from disinterested friends, should the secret become public property on Blue, and he wanted at least the benefit of an honest confession. That selfishness, however, was but a small part of his motive. He sincerely felt that it was Rita's privilege to know all about the affair, and his duty to tell her. He had no desire to conceal his sin; he would not take her love under a false pretence. He almost felt that confession would purge him of his sin, and looked forward with a certain pleasure to the pain he would inflict upon himself in telling her. In his desire for self-castigation he lost sight of the pain he would inflict upon her. He knew she would be pained by the disclosure, but he feared more its probable effect upon her love for him, and looked for indignant contempt and scorn from her, rather than for the manifestation of great pain. He resolved to write to Rita

at once and make a clean breast of it; but Billy advised him to wait till she was entirely well.

Dic, quite willing to postpone his confession, wrote several letters, which kind Miss Tousy delivered; but he did not speak of Sukey Yates until Rita's letters informed him that she was growing strong. Then he wrote to her and told her in as few words as possible the miserable story of his infidelity. He did not blame Sukey, nor excuse himself. He simply stated the fact and said: "I hardly dare hope for your forgiveness. It seems that you must despise me as I despise myself. It is needless for me to tell you of my love for you, which has not wavered during so many years that I have lost their count. But now that I deserve your scorn; now that I am in dread of losing you who have so long been more than all else to me, you are dearer than ever before. Write to me, I beg, and tell me that you do not despise me. Ah, Rita, compared to you, there is no beauty, no purity, no tenderness in the world. There seems to be but one woman — you, and I have thrown away your love as if I were a blind fool who did not know its value. Write to me, I beg, and tell me that I am forgiven."

But she did not write to him. In place of a letter he received a small package containing the ivory box and the unfortunate band of gold that had brought trouble to Billy Little long years before.

WISE MISS TOUSY

CHAPTER XIV

Wise Miss Tousy

UPON first reading Dic's letter, Rita was stunned by its contents; but within a day or two her thoughts and emotions began to arrange themselves, and out of order came conclusion. The first conclusion was a surprise to her: she did not love Dic as she had supposed. A scornful indifference seemed to occupy the place in her heart that for years had been Dic's. With that indifference came a sense of change. Dic was not the Dic she had known and loved. He was another person; and to this feeling of strangeness was added one of scorn. This new Dic was a man unworthy of any pure girl's love; and although her composite emotion was streaked with excruciating pain, as a whole it was decidedly against him, and she felt that she wished never to see him again. She began a letter to him, but did not care to finish it, and returned the ring without comment, that being the only answer he deserved. Pages of scorn could not have brought to Dic a keener realization of the certainty and enormity of his loss. He returned the ring to Billy Little.

"I thank you for it, Billy, though it has brought grief to me as it did to you. I do not blame the ring; my loss is my own fault; but it is strange that the history of the ring should repeat itself. It almost makes one superstitious."

"Egad! no one else shall suffer by it," said Billy, opening the huge iron stove and throwing the ring into the fire.

Dic's loss was so heavy that it mollified Billy's anger, which for several days had been keen against his young friend. Billy's own pain and grief also had a softening effect upon his anger; for with Dic out of the way, Rita Bays, he thought, would soon become Mrs. Roger Williams, and that thought was torture to the bachelor heart.

Rita, bearing the name of his first and only sweetheart, had entered the heart of this man's second youth; and in the person of Dic he was wooing her and fighting the good fight of love against heavy odds. Dic, upon receiving the ring, was ready to surrender; but Billy well knew that many a battle had been won after defeat, and was determined not to throw down his arms.

Thinking over his situation, Dic became convinced that since Rita was lost to him, he was in honor bound to marry Sukey Yates. Life would be a desert waste, but there was no one to thank for the future Sahara but himself, and the self-inflicted sand and thirst must be endured. The thought of marrying Sukey Yates at first caused him almost to hate her; but after he had pondered the subject three or four days, familiarity bred contempt of its terrors. Once having accepted the unalterable, he was at least rid of the pain of suspense. He tried to make himself believe that his pain was not so keen as he had expected it would be; and by shutting out of his mind all thoughts of Rita, he partially succeeded.

Sunday afternoon Dic saw Sukey at church and rode home with her, resting that evening upon her ciphering log. He had determined to tell her that he would marry her; but despite his desire to end the suspense, he could not bring himself to speak the words. He allowed her to believe, by inference, what she chose, and she, though still in great doubt, felt that the important question was almost settled in her favor.

During the interim of four or five days Billy Little secretly called upon Miss Tousy, and incidentally dropped in to see Rita.

After discussing matters of health and weather, Billy said: "Rita, you must not be too hard on Dic. He was not to blame. Sukey is a veritable little Eve, and — "

"Billy Little, I am sorry to hear you place the blame on Sukey. I suppose Dic tells you she was to blame."

"By Jove! I've made a nice mess of it," muttered Billy. "No, Dic blames himself entirely, but I know whereof I speak. That girl is in love with him, and has set this trap to steal him from you and get him for herself. She has been trying for a long time to entrap him, and you are helping her. Dic is a true, pure man, who has been enticed into error and suffers for it. You had better die unmarried than to lose him."

"I hope to die unmarried, and I pray that I may die soon," returned Rita with a deep, sad sigh.

"No, you'll not die unmarried. You will marry Williams," said Billy, looking earnestly into her eyes.

"I shall not."

"If you wish to throw Dic over and marry Williams, you should openly avow it, and not seize this misfortune of Dic's as an excuse."

"Oh, Billy Little, you don't think me capable of that, do you?" answered Rita, reproachfully.

"Do you give me your word you will not marry Williams?" asked Billy, eagerly.

"Yes, I give you my word I will not marry him, if — if I can help it," she answered, and poor Billy collapsed. He took his handkerchief from his pocket to dry the perspiration on his face, although the room was cold, and Rita drew forth her handkerchief to dry her tears.

"Dic loves you, Rita. He is one man out of ten thousand. He is honest, true, and pure-minded. He has

sinned, I know; but he has repented. One sin doesn't make a sinner, and repentance is the market price of mercy. I know a great deal of this world, my girl, and of its men and women, and I tell you Dic is as fine a character as I know. I don't know a man that is his equal. Don't let this one fault condemn him and yourself to wretchedness."

"I shall not be wretched," she replied, the picture of woe, "for I don't — don't care for him. I'm surprised, Billy Little, that I do not, and I think less of myself. There must be something wrong about me. I must be wicked when my — my love can turn so easily to indifference. But I do not care for him. He is nothing to me any more. You may be sure I speak the truth and — and although I am glad to have you here, I don't want you to remain if you continue to speak of — of him."

The situation certainly was confusing, and Billy, in a revery, resorted to Maxwelton's braes as a brain clarifier. Soon wild thoughts came to his mind, and wilder hopes arose in his bachelor heart. This girl, whom he had loved for, lo, these many years, was now free of heart and hand. Could it be possible there was hope for him? Pat with this strange thought spoke Rita: —

"You say he is a splendid man, pure and true and honest; but you know, Billy Little, that measured by the standard of your life, he is not. I used to think he was like you, that you had made him like yourself, and I did love him, Billy Little. I did love him. But there is no one like you. You are now my only friend." Tears came to her eyes, and she leaned toward Billy, gently taking his hand between her soft palms. Tumult caused the poor bachelor heart to lose self-control, and out of its fulness to speak: —

"You would not marry me?" he asked. The words were meant as a question, but fortunately Rita understood

them as a mere statement of a patent fact, spoken jestingly, so she answered with a laugh: —

"No, of course not. I could not marry you, Billy Little. But I wish you were young; then, do you know, I would make you propose to me. You should not have been born so soon, Billy Little. But if I can't have you for my husband, I'll have you for my second father, and *you* shall not desert me."

Her jest quickly drove the wild hopes out of the bachelor heart, and Billy trembled when he thought of what he had tried to say. He left the house much agitated, and returned to see Miss Tousy. After a consultation with that lady covering an hour, he went to the tavern and took the stage for home.

Next day, in the midst of Dic's struggles for peace, and at a time when he had almost determined to marry Sukey Yates, a letter came from Miss Tousy, asking him to go to see her. While waiting for the stage, Dic exhibited Miss Tousy's letter, and Billy feigned surprise.

Two or three days previous to the writing of Miss Tousy's letter, Rita had told that sympathetic young lady the story of the trouble with Dic. The confidence was given one afternoon in Miss Tousy's cosey little parlor.

"When is your friend Mr. Bright coming to see you?" asked Miss Tousy. "You are welcome to meet him here if you cannot receive him at home."

"He will not come again at all," answered Rita, closely scanning her hands folded on her lap.

"Why?" asked her friend, in much concern, "has your mother at last forced you to give him up?"

"No, mother knows nothing of it yet — nothing at all. I simply sent his ring back and don't want to — to see him again. Never."

"My dear girl, you are crazy," exclaimed Miss Tousy. "You don't know what you are doing — unless you have

grown fond of Mr. Williams; but I can't believe that is true. No girl would think twice of him when so splendid a fellow as Dic — Mr. Bright — was — "

"No, indeed," interrupted Rita, "that can never be true. I would never care for any man as I cared for — for him. But I care for him no longer. It is all over between — between — it is all over."

From the hard expression of the girl's face one might easily have supposed she was speaking the truth; there was no trace of emotion.

"But, Rita! This will never do!" insisted Miss Tousy. "You don't know yourself. You are taking a step that will wreck your happiness. You should also consider him."

"You don't know what he has done," answered Rita, still looking down at her folded hands.

"I don't *care* what he has done. You did not make yourself love him, and you cannot throw off your love. You may for a time convince yourself that you are indifferent, but you are simply lying to yourself, my dear girl, and you had better lie to any one else — the consequences will be less serious. Never deceive yourself, Rita. That is a deception you can't maintain. You may perhaps deceive all the rest of the world so long as you live — many a person has done it — but yourself — hopeless, Rita, perfectly hopeless."

"I'm not deceiving myself," answered the wilful girl. "You don't know what he has done."

"I don't *care*," retorted Miss Tousy warmly. "If he were my lover, I — I tell you, Rita Bays, I'd forgive him. I'd keep him. He is one out of a thousand — so big and handsome; so honest, strong, and true."

"But he's not true; that's the trouble," answered Rita, angrily, although there had been a soft, tell-tale radiance in her eyes when Miss Tousy praised him.

"Ah, he has been inveigled into smiling upon another girl," asked Miss Tousy, laughing and taking Rita's hand. "That is the penalty you must pay for having so splendid a lover. Of course other girls will want him. I should like to have him myself — and, Rita, there are lots of girls bold enough or weak enough to seek him outright. You mustn't see those little things. Frequently the best use a woman can make of her eyes is to shut them."

In place of shutting her eyes, Rita began to weep, and Miss Tousy continued: —

"This man loves you and no other, my sweet one. That's the great thing, after all. No girl can steal his heart from you — of that you may be sure."

"But I say you don't know," sobbed Rita. "I will tell you." And she did tell her, stumbling, sobbing, and blushing through the narrative of Dic's unforgivable perfidy.

Miss Tousy whistled in surprise. After a moment of revery she said: "She is trying to steal him, Rita, and she is as bad as she can be. If you will give me your promise that you will never tell, I'll tell you something Sue Davidson told me." Rita promised. "Not long since your brother Tom called on Sue and left his great-coat in the hall. Sue's young sister got to rummaging in Tom's great-coat pockets, for candy, I suppose, and found a letter from this same Sukey Yates to Tom. Sue told me about the letter. It breathed the most passionate love, and implored Tom to save her from the ruin he had wrought. So you see, Dic is not to blame." She paused, expecting her listener to agree with her; but Rita sighed and murmured: —

"He is not excusable because others have been wicked."

"But I tell you I wouldn't let that little wretch steal him from me," insisted Miss Tousy. "That's what she's

trying to do, and you're helping her. When she was here I saw plainly that she was infatuated with him, and was bound to win him at any price — at any cost. She had no eyes nor dimples for any one else when he was by; yet he did not notice her — did not see her smiles and dimples. Don't tell me he cares for her. He had eyes for no one but you. Haven't you seen how other girls act toward him? Didn't you notice how Sue Davidson went at him every chance she got?"

"No," answered Rita, still studying her folded hands, and regardless of her tear-stained face.

"I think Sue is the prettiest girl in town, excepting you," continued Miss Tousy, "and if she could not attract him, it would be hopeless for any one else to try."

"Nonsense," murmured Rita, referring to that part of Miss Tousy's remark which applied to herself.

"No, it isn't nonsense, Rita. You are the prettiest girl I ever saw — but no matter. She is pretty enough for me to hate her. She is the sort of pretty girl that all women hate and fear. She obtrudes her prettiness — keeps her attractions always *en évidence*, as the French say. She moistens her lips to make them tempting, and twitches the right side of her face to work that dimple of hers. She is so attractive that she is not usually driven to seek a man openly; but Dic — I mean Mr. Bright — did not even see her smiles. Every one else did; and I will wager anything you like she has written love-notes to him — real love-notes. He would, of course, be too honorable to tell. He's not the sort of man who would kiss and tell — he is the sort women trust with their favors — but I'll wager I'm right about Sue Davidson." She was right, though Dic's modesty had not permitted him to see Miss D.'s notes in the light Miss Tousy saw them.

"He is not the man," continued Miss Tousy, "to blame a girl for a fault of that sort, even in his own mind, and he

would not explain at a woman's expense to save his life. With a man of his sort, the girl is to blame nine times out of ten. I wouldn't give a fippenny bit for a man no other girl wanted. There is a large class of women you don't know yet, Rita. You are too young. The world has a batch of mawkish theories about them, but there are also a few very cold facts kept in the dark, — lodge secrets among the sex. Dic is modest, and modesty in an attractive man is dangerous — the most dangerous thing in the world, Rita. Deliver me from a shy, attractive man, unless he cares a great deal for me. Shyness in a man is apt to make a girl bold."

"It did not make me bold," said Rita, with a touch of fire.

"Not in the least?" asked Miss Tousy, leaning over the girl's lap, looking up into her face and laughing. "Now come, Rita, confess; you're as modest as a girl has any good reason to be, but tell me, didn't you — didn't you do your part? Now confess."

"Well, I may have been a little bold, I admit, a very little — just at — you know, just at one time. I *had* to be a little — just a little — you see — you know, outspoken, or — you know what I mean. He might not have — oh, you understand how such things happen."

The hands in the lap were growing very interesting during these remarks, and the tear-stained cheeks were very hot and red.

"Yes, yes, dear," said Miss Tousy, leaning forward and kissing the hot cheeks, "yes, yes, sweet one. I know one just *has* to help them a bit; but that is not boldness, that is charity."

"Since I think about it, perhaps I was," murmured Rita. "I know I have often turned hot all over because of several things I did; but I cared so much for him. I was so young and ignorant. That was over two years ago. I

cared so much for him and was all bewildered. Nothing seemed real to me during several months of that time. Part of the time it seemed I was in a nightmare, and again, it was like being in heaven. A poor girl is not a responsible being at such times. She doesn't know what she does nor what she wants; but it's all over now. I . . . don't . . . care anything . . . about . . . him now. It's all over." Such a mournful little voice you never heard, and such a mournful little face you never saw. Still, it was all over.

Miss Tousy softly kissed her and said: "Well, well, we'll straighten it all out. There, don't cry, sweet one." But Rita did cry, and found comfort in resting her head on Miss Tousy's sympathetic bosom.

The letter Sue Davidson had found altered Rita's feeling toward Sukey; but it left untouched Dic's sin against herself, and she insisted that she did not care for him, and never, never would forgive. With all her gentleness she had strong nerves, and her spirit, when aroused, was too high to brook patiently the insult Dic had put upon her. Miss Tousy's words had not moved her from her position. Dic was no longer Dic. He was another person, and she could love no man but Dic. She had loved him all her life, and she could love none other. With such poor sophistry did she try to convince herself that she was indifferent. At times she succeeded beyond her most sanguine hope, and tried to drive conviction home by a song. But the song always changed to tears, the tears to anger, anger to sophistry, and all in turn to a dull pain at the heart, making her almost wish she were dead.

Meanwhile the affairs of Fisher and Fox were becoming more and more involved. Crops had failed, and collections could not be made. Williams, under alleged impera-

"Miss Tousy softly kissed her and said, . . . 'There, don't cry, sweet one.'"

tive orders from Boston, was pressing for money or security. Tom had "overdrawn" his account in Williams's office; and, with the penitentiary staring him in the face, was clamoring for money to make good the overdraft. At home he used the words "overdraft" and "overdrawn" in confessing the situation. Williams, when speaking to Tom of the shortage, had used the words "embezzlement" and "thief."

Rita's illness had prevented Williams's visits; but when she recovered, he began calling, though he was ominously sullen in his courtship, and his passion for the girl looked very much like a mania.

One evening at supper table, Tom said: "Father, I must have five hundred dollars. I have overdrawn my account with Williams, and I'll lose my place if it is not paid. I *must* have it. Can't you help me?"

"What on earth have you been doing with the money?" asked Tom, Sr. "I have paid your tailor bills and your other bills to a sufficient amount, in all conscience, and what could you have done with the money you got from Williams and your salary?"

Tom tried to explain, and soon the Chief Justice joined in: "La, father, there are so many temptations in town for young men, and our Tom is so popular. Money goes fast, doesn't it, Tom? The boy can't tell what went with it. Poor Tom! If your father was half a man, he'd get the money for you; that's what he would. If your sister was not the most wicked, selfish girl alive, she could settle all our troubles. Mr. Williams would not press his brother-in-law or his wife's father. I have toiled and suffered and worked for that girl all my life, and so has her father, and so have you, Tom. We have all toiled and suffered and worked for her, and now she's too ungrateful to help us. Oh, 'sharper than a serpent's tooth,' as the Immortal Bard of Avon truly says."

Rita began to cry and rose from her chair, intending to leave the room, but her mother detained her.

"Sit down!" she commanded. "At least you shall hear of the trouble you bring upon us. I have been thinking of a plan, and maybe you can help us carry it out if you want to do anything to help your father and brother. As for myself, I don't care. I am always willing to suffer and endure. 'Blessed are they that suffer, for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven.'"

Tom pricked up his ears, Tom, Sr., put down his knife and fork to listen, and Rita again took her seat at table.

"Billy Little has plenty of money," continued Mrs. Margarita, addressing her daughter. "The old skinflint has refused to lend it to your father or Tom, but perhaps he'll not refuse you if you ask him. I believe the old fool is in love with you. What they all want with you I can't see, but if you'll write to him —"

"Oh, I can't, mother, I can't," cried Rita, in a flood of tears.

I will not drag the reader through another scene of heart failure and maternal raving. Rita, poor girl, at last surrendered, and, amid tears of humiliation, wrote to Billy Little, telling of her father's distress, her mother's commands, and her own grief because she was compelled to apply to him. "You need not fear loss of your money, my friend," she wrote, honestly believing that she told the truth. "You will soon be repaid. Mr. Williams is demanding money from my father and Uncle Jim, and I dislike, for many reasons well known to you, to be under obligations to him. If you can, without inconvenience to yourself, lend this money, it will help father greatly just at this time, and will perhaps save me from a certain frightful importunity. The money will be repaid to you after harvest, when collections become easier. If I did not honestly believe so, even my mother's commands would not induce me to write this letter."

Rita fully believed the money would be paid; but Billy knew that if he made the loan, he would be throwing his money away forever.

After making good Dic's loss of twenty-six hundred dollars, — which sum, you may remember, went to Bays, — Little had remaining in his strong-box notes to the amount of two thousand dollars, which, together with his small stock of goods and two or three hundred dollars in cash, constituted the total sum of his worldly wealth. He had reached a point in life where he plainly saw old age staring him in the face — an ugly stare which few can return with equanimity. The small bundle of notes was all that stood between him and want when that time should come "sans everything." But Williams was staring Rita in the face, and if the little hoard could save her, she was welcome to it.

Billy's sleep the night after he received Rita's letter was meagre and disturbed, but next morning he took his notes and his poor little remainder of cash and went to Indianapolis. He discounted the notes, as he had done in Dic's case, and with the proceeds he went to the store of Fisher and Bays. Fisher was present when Billy entered the private office and announced his readiness to supply the firm with twenty-three hundred dollars on their note of hand. The money, of course, being borrowed by the firm, went to the firm account, and was at once applied by Fisher upon one of the many Williams notes. Therefore Tom's "overdrafts" remained *in statu quo;* likewise the penitentiary.

The payment of Billy Little's twenty-three hundred dollars upon the Williams debt did not help matters in the least. The notes owed by the firm of Fisher and Bays to the Williams house aggregated nearly fourteen thousand dollars, and Billy's poor little all did not stem the tide of importunity one day, although it left him penniless. The thought of his poverty was of course painful to Billy, but

he rode home that evening without seeing Rita, happy and exultant in the mistaken belief that he had helped to save her from the grasp of Williams.

That same evening at supper Tom, Sr., told of Billy Little's loan, and there was at once an outburst of wrath from mother and son because part of the money had not been applied to Tom's "overdraft."

"The pitiful sum of twenty-three hundred dollars!" cried Tom. "The old skinflint might as well have kept his money for all the good it will do us. Do you think that will keep Williams from suing us?" In Tom's remarks Mrs. Bays concurred, saying that she "always knew he was a mean old miser."

Rita tried to speak in her friend's defence, but the others furiously silenced her, so she broke down entirely, covered her face with her hands, and wept bitterly. She went through the after-supper work amid blinding tears, and when she had finished she sought her room. Without undressing she lay down on the bed, sobbing till the morning light shone in at her window. Before she had lost Dic her heart could fly from every trouble and find sweet comfort in thoughts of him; but now there was no refuge. She was alone in the world, save for Billy Little. She loved her father, but she knew he was weak. She loved Tom, but she could not help despising him. She loved her mother, but she feared her, and knew there was no comfort or consolation for her in that hard heart. Billy had not come to see her when he brought the money, and she feared she had offended him by asking for it.

Such was the situation when Dic received Miss Tousy's letter inviting him to call upon her.

Miss Tousy greeted Dic kindly when he presented himself at her door, and led him to the same cosey front parlor

wherein Rita had imparted the story of her woes and of Dic's faithlessness. She left her guest in the parlor a moment or two, while she despatched a note to a friend in town. When she returned she said: —

"I'm sorry to hear of the trouble between you and Rita, and am determined it shall be made up at once."

"I fear that is impossible, Miss Tousy," returned Dic, sadly. "She will never forgive me. I should not were I in her place. I do not expect it and am not worth it."

"But she will forgive you; she will not be able to hold out against you five minutes if you crowd her. Trust my word. I know more about girls than you do; but, above all, I know Rita."

Miss Tousy watched him as he stood before her, hanging his head, a very handsome picture of abject humility. After a moment of silence Dic answered: —

"Miss Tousy, the truth is, I have lost all self-respect, and know that I am both a fool and a — a criminal. Rita will not, cannot, and ought not to forgive me. I am entirely unworthy of her. She is gentle and tender as she can be; but she has more spirit than you would suspect. I have seen her under the most trying circumstances, and with all her gentleness she is very strong. I have lost her and must give her up."

"You'll be no such fool," cried Miss Tousy; "but some one is knocking at the front door. Be seated, please." She opened the front hall door, kissed "some one" who had knocked, and said to "some one": —

"Step into the parlor, please. I will be with you soon." Then she closed the parlor door and basely fled.

Dic sprang to his feet, and Rita, turning backward toward the door, stood trembling, her hand on the knob.

"Don't go, Rita," said Dic, huskily. "I did not know you were coming here. I give you my word, I did not set a trap for you. Miss Tousy will tell you I had no

thought of seeing you here. I wanted to see you, but I would not try to entrap you. I intended going to your house openly that you might refuse to see me if you wished; but since you are here, please — oh, Rita, for God's sake, stay and hear me. I am almost crazed by what I have suffered, though I deserve it all, all. You don't know what I have to say." She partly opened the door; but he stepped quickly to her side, shut the door, and spoke almost angrily: —

"You shall hear me, and after I have spoken, if you wish, you may go, but not until then."

He unclasped her hand from the knob, and, using more of his great strength than he knew, led her to a chair and brought another for himself.

The touch of command in Dic's manner sent a strange thrill to the girl's heart, and she learned in one brief moment that all her sophistry had been in vain; that her love was not dead, and could not be killed. That knowledge, however, did not change her resolution not to forgive him. You see, there was a touch of the Chief Justice in the girl.

"I want you to hear me, Rita, and, if you can, I want you to forgive me, and then I want you to forget me," said Dic.

The words "forget me" were not what she had expected to hear. She had supposed he would make a plea for forgiveness and beg to be taken back; but the words "forget me," seeming to lead in another direction, surprised her. With all her resolutions she was not prepared to forget. She lifted her eyes for a fleeting glance, and could not help thinking that the memory of his face had been much less effective than its presence. The tones of his voice, too, were stronger and sweeter at close range than she had remembered. In short, Dic by her side and Dic twenty-five miles away were two different propositions

— the former a very dangerous and irresistible one, indeed. Still, she would not forgive him. She could not and would not forget him; but she would shut her eyes to the handsome face, she would close her ears to the deep, strong voice, she would harden her heart to his ardent love, and, alas! to her own. She insisted to herself that she no longer loved him, and never, never would.

Every word that Sukey had ever spoken concerning Dic, every meeting of which she knew that had ever taken place between him and the dimpler, — in fact, all the trivial events that had happened between her lover and the girl who was trying to steal him from her, including the occurrence at Scott's social, — came vividly back to Rita at that moment with exaggerated meaning, and told her she had for years been a poor, trusting dupe. She would listen to Dic because he was the stronger and could compel her to remain in the room; but when he should finish, she would go and would never speak to Miss Tousy again.

"This is a terrible calamity I have brought upon us," said Dic, speaking with difficulty and constraint. "It is like blindness or madness, and means wretchedness for life to you and me."

Still the unexpected direction, thought Rita, but she answered out of her firm resolve: —

"I shall not be wretched, for I do not — don't care. The time was when I did care very, very much; but now I —" She did not finish the sentence, and her conscience reproached her, for she knew she was uttering a big, black lie.

Dic had expected scorn, and had thought he would be able to bear it without flinching. He had fortified himself days before by driving all hope out of his heart, but (as we say and feel when our dear ones die) he was not prepared, even though he well knew what was coming. Her words stunned him for a moment, but he soon pulled himself together, and his unselfish love brought a feeling akin

to relief: a poor, dry sort of joy, because he had learned that she did not suffer the pain that was torturing him. No mean part of his pain was because of Rita's suffering. If she did not suffer, he could endure the penalty of his sin with greater fortitude. This slight relief came to him, not because his love was weak, but because his unselfishness was strong.

"If I could really believe that you do not care," he said, struggling with a torturing lump in his throat, "if I could surely know that you do not suffer the pain I feel, I might endure it — God in heaven! I suppose I might endure it. But when I think that I have brought suffering to you, I am almost wild."

The girl's hands were folded demurely upon her lap, and she was gazing down at them. She lifted her eyes for an instant, and there was an unwonted hardness in them as she answered: "You need not waste any sympathy on me. I don't want it."

"Is it really true, Rita," he asked, "that you no longer care for me? Was your love a mere garment you could throw off at will?" He paused, but Rita making no reply, he continued: "It wounds my vanity to learn that I so greatly overestimated your love for me, and I can hardly believe that you speak the truth, but — but I hope — I almost hope you do. Every sense of honor I possess tells me I must accept the wages of my sin and marry Sukey Yates, even though —"

Suddenly a change came over the scene. The girl who had been so passive and cold at once became active and very warm. She sprang to her feet, panting with excitement. Resolutions and righteous indignation were scattered to the four winds by the tremendous shock of his words. Sukey at last had stolen him. That thought seemed to be burning itself into the very heart of her consciousness.

"You — you marry Sukey Yates!" she cried, breathing heavily and leaning toward Dic, one hand resting on the arm of his chair, "you *marry* her?" The question was almost a wail.

"But if you no longer care there can be no reason why I should not," said Dic, hardly knowing in the whirl of his surprise what he was saying.

Rita thought of the letter to Tom, and all the sympathetic instincts of her nature sprang up to protect Dic, and to save him from Sukey's wicked designs.

"Oh," she cried, falling back into her chair, "you surely did not believe me!"

"And you do care?" asked Dic, almost stunned by her sudden change of front. Rita's conduct had always been so sedate and sensible that he did not suppose she was possessed of ordinary feminine weaknesses.

"Oh, Dic," she replied, "I never thought you would desert me." *In*consistency may also be a jewel.

Dic concluded he was an incarnate mistake. Whichever way he turned, he seemed to be wrong.

"I desert you?" he exclaimed. "But you returned my ring and did not even answer my letter, and now your scorn —"

"What else could you expect?" asked the girl, in a passionate flow of tears.

"I don't know what I expected, but I certainly did not expect this," answered Dic, musing on the blessed fault of inconsistency that dwells in every normal woman's breast. "I did not expect this, or I should have acted differently toward her after you returned the ring. I would not have — I — I — God help me!" and he buried his face in his hands.

"You would not have done what, Dic? Tell me all." Her heart came to him in his trouble. He had sinned, but he was suffering, and that she could not bear.

The low, soft tones of her voice soothed him, and he answered: "I would not have allowed her to believe I intended marrying her. I did not tell her in words that I would, but — I can't tell you. I can't speak." He saw Rita's face turn pale, and though his words almost choked him, he continued, "I suppose I must pay the penalty of my sin."

He gently put the girl from him, and went to the window, where he leaned, gazing into the street. She also rose, and stood waiting for him to speak. After a long pause she called his name, —

"Dic!"

When he turned she was holding out her arms to him, and the next moment they were round his neck.

After a blank hour of almost total silence in the parlor, Miss Tousy came to the door and knocked. She had listened at the door several times during the hour; but, hearing no enlightening words or sounds, she had retreated in good order.

Allowing a moment to elapse after knocking, Miss Tousy called: —

"Are you still there?"

Rita had been very still there, and was vividly conscious of the fact when Miss Tousy knocked. Going to the door, Rita opened it, saying: —

"Yes, we are still here. I'm ashamed to have kept you out so long." She looked her shame and blushed most convincingly.

Upon hearing the knock, Dic hurried over to the window, and when Miss Tousy entered he deluded himself into the belief that his attitude of careless repose would induce her to conclude he had been standing there all the afternoon. But Miss Tousy, in common with all other young ladies, had innate knowledge upon such subjects, and possibly also a little experience — she was twenty-five, mind you —; so she was amused rather than deceived.

"Well?" she asked, and paused for answer.

"Yes," answered Rita.

They understood each other, if we do not, for Miss Tousy kissed Rita and then boldly went to Dic and deliberately kissed him. Thereupon Rita cried, "Oh!" Dic blushed, and all three laughed.

"But I'll leave you to yourselves again," said accommodating Miss Tousy. "I know you want to be alone."

"Oh, we are through," answered Rita, blushing, and Dic reluctantly assented. Miss Tousy laughed and asked: —

"Through what?"

Then there was more blushing and more laughing, and Rita replied, "Just through — that's all."

"Well, I congratulate you," said Miss Tousy, taking Rita's hand, "and am very happy that I have been the means of bringing you together again. Take the advice of one who is older than you," continued Miss Tousy, the old and the wise, "and never, never again allow anything to separate you. Love is the sweetest blossom of life, whose gentle wings will always cover you with the aromatic harmony of an everlasting sunlight." Rita thought the metaphor beautiful, and Dic was too interested to be critical. Then Rita and Miss Tousy, without any reason at all, began to weep, and Dic felt as uncomfortable as the tears of two women could make him.

THE CHRISTMAS GIFT

CHAPTER XV

The Christmas Gift

DIC started home with his heart full of unalloyed happiness; but at the end of four hours, when he was stabling his horse, the old pain for the sake of another's sorrow asserted itself, and his happiness seemed to be a sin. Rita's tender heart also underwent a change while she lay that night wakeful with joy and gazing into the darkness.

Amid all her joy came the ever recurring vision of Sukey's wretchedness. While under the convincing influence of her own arguments and Dic's resistless presence, she had seen but one side of the question, — her own; but darkness is a great help to the inner sight, and now the other side of the case had its hearing. She remembered Sukey's letter to Tom, but she knew the unfortunate girl loved Dic. Was it right, she asked herself over and over again, was it right that she should be happy at the cost of another's woe? Then came again the flood of her great longing — the longing of her whole life — and she tried to tell herself she did not care who suffered, she intended to be happy. That was the way of the world, and it should be her way. But Rita's heart was a poor place for such thoughts to thrive, and when she arose next morning, after a sleepless night of mingled joy and sorrow, she was almost as unhappy as she had been the previous morning. She spent several days and nights alternating between two opinions; but finally, after repeated conversations with Miss

Tousy, whose opinions you already know, and after meditating upon Sukey's endeavor to entrap two men, she arrived at two opposing conclusions. First, it was her duty to give Dic up; and second, she would do nothing of the sort. That was the first, and I believe the only selfish resolve that ever established itself in the girl's heart with her full knowledge and consent. But the motive behind it was overpowering. She shut her lips and said she "didn't care," and once having definitely settled the question, she dismissed it, feeling that she was very sinful, but also very happy.

Dic, of course, soon sought Billy Little, the ever ready receptacle of his joys and sorrows.

No man loved the words, "I told you so," more dearly than Little, and when Dic entered the store he was greeted with that irritating sentence before he had spoken a word.

"You told me what?" asked Dic, pretending not to understand.

"Come, come," returned Billy, joyously, "I see it in your face. You know what I mean. Don't try to appear more thick-headed than you are. Oh, perhaps you are troubled with false modesty, and wish to hide the light of a keen perception. Let it shine, Dic, let it shine. Hide it not. Avoid the bushel."

Dic laughed and said: "Well, you were right; she did forgive me. Now please don't continue to point out your superior wisdom. I see it without your help. Get thee a bushel, Billy Little, lest you shine too brightly."

"No insolence, young man, no insolence," retorted Billy, with a face grave and serious, save for a joyful smile in his eyes.

"Close the store door, Billy Little," said Dick, after a few minutes of conversation, "and come back to the room. I want to talk to you."

"The conceit of some people!" replied the happy mer-

chant. "So you would have me close my emporium for the sake of your small affairs?"

"Yes," responded Dic.

"Well, nothing wins like self-conceit," answered Billy. "Here's the key. Lock the front door, and I'll be with you when I fold this bolt of India silk."

Dic locked the door, Billy finished folding the India silk — a bolt of two-bit muslin, — and the friends went into the back room.

How sweet it is to prepare one's self deliberately for good news! Billy, in a glow of joy, lighted his pipe, moved his chair close to the fireplace, for the day was cold, and gave the word of command — "Go ahead!"

Dic told him all that had happened in Miss Tousy's parlor, omitting, of course, to mention the blank hour, and added: "I had a letter from Rita this morning, and she feels as I do, that we are very cruel; but she says she would rather be selfish and happy than unselfish and miserable, which, as you know, is not at all true. She couldn't be selfish if she were to try."

"Good little brain in that little head," exclaimed Billy. "There never was a better. But, as you say, she's wrong in charging herself with selfishness. I believe she has more common sense, more virtue, more tenderness, gentleness, beauty, and unselfishness than any other girl in the world."

Dick laughed, very much pleased with his friend's comments upon Rita. "I believe you are in love with her yourself."

The shaft unintentionally struck centre and Billy's scalp blushed as he haltingly remarked, "Well, I suppose you're right." Then after a long pause — "Maxwelton's braes, um, um, um." Another long pause ensued, during which Billy knocked the ashes from his pipe against the wall of the fireplace, poked the back-log, and threw on two or three large pieces of wood.

"I don't mind telling you," he said, chuckling with laughter, "that I was almost in love with her at one time. She was so perfect — had the same name, face, and disposition of — of another that — Jove! I was terribly jealous of you."

"Nonsense," answered Dic, with a great pleased laugh.

"Of course it was nonsense. I knew it then and know it now; but when, let me ask you, had nonsense or any other kind of sense anything to do with a man falling in love?"

"I think it the most sensible thing a man can do," answered Dic, out of the fulness of his cup of youth.

"Has it made you happy?"

"Yes, and no."

"But mostly no?" responded the cynic.

"Yes, Billy Little, so far it's been mostly no; but the time will come when I will be very happy because of it."

"Not if you can help it. We will see how it turns out in the end."

"Billy Little, you are the greatest croaker I ever knew," observed Dic, testily.

"It is better to croak early than to sing too soon. But what do you want?"

"I want to know again what I shall do about Sukey since this new change in Rita. When I thought Rita was lost to me, I fear I permitted Sukey to believe I would, you know, comply with her wishes; but now I can't, and I don't know how to tell her about it. I said nothing, but my silence almost committed me."

After a moment spent in thought, Billy answered: "Frederick the Great used to say, 'In default of unanswerable arguments it is better to express one's self laconically and not go beating about the bush.' Go tell her."

"That's easier to advise than to do," retorted Dic. "She will cry, and —"

"Yes, I know; if it were as easy to do as it is to advise, this would be a busy world. She will cry, and a woman's tears hurt the right sort of man. But bless my soul, Dic, why don't you settle your own affairs? I'm tired of it all. It's getting to trouble me as much as it troubles you." Billy paused, gazing into the fire, and dropped into a half-revery. "I can see the poor little dimpler weeping and grieving. I can hear her sobs and feel her heartaches. She is not good; but the fault is not hers, and I wish I might bear her pain and suffer in her stead. I believe it hurts me more to see others suffer than to suffer myself. I wish I might bear every one's suffering and die on a modern Calvary. What a glorious thought that is, Dic — the Master's vicarious atonement! Even if the story be nothing but a fable, as some men claim, the thought is a glorious one, and the fate — ah, the fate — but such a fate is only for God. If I can't help the suffering of the world, I wish I might live in the midst of Sahara, where I could not hear of human pain. It hurts me, Dic. Indeed it does. And this poor little dimpler — I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Ah, Billy Little, think of my sorrow," said Dick.

"It's a question whether we should shrink from our troubles or face them," continued Little; "but in your case I should choose the shrinking, and write to the poor, pathetic little dimpler. Poor thing! Her days of dimpling are over. If you knew that you had led her astray, your duty, I believe, would be clear; but there is the 'if' that gives us serious pause and makes cowards of us both. Write to her, Dic. You are too great a coward to face her, and I'm not brave enough even to advise it."

Dic wrote to Sukey, and avoided the pain of facing her, but not the pain of knowing that she suffered. His letter brought an answer from Sukey that was harder to bear than reproaches.

Within two or three days Sukey wrote to Rita, whom she knew to be the cause of Dic's desertion. The letter to Rita, like the one to Dic, contained no word of reproach. "I do not blame you for keeping him," she said in closing. "He has always belonged to you. I hope you will be happy and not trouble yourselves about me. No one knows about this terrible affair, Rita, but you and Dic, and I hope you will tell nobody. Especially, please, please, don't tell Tom. This is the only request I make: don't let Tom know anything about it. I want to confess, Rita, that I have been very wicked, and that Dic is not to blame. I feel it my duty to tell you this, so that you may not blame him. I have brought trouble to you both, and it is as little as I should do to tell you the truth. The fault was mine. I gave him a love powder. But I loved him."

Sukey's letter came one morning four or five days before Christmas. Rita wept all day over it, and at night it helped her in taking a step that settled all the momentous questions touching Dic and herself.

On the same fateful day Mr. Bays and Tom came home together in the middle of the afternoon. That unwonted event was, in itself, alarming. Rita was reading near the window, and her mother was knitting before the fire. When our Toms, father and son, entered the room, trouble was plainly visible upon their faces. Tom senior threw his cap and great fur coat on the bed, while De Triflin' leaned against the mantel-shelf. Drawing a chair to the fire, Tom the elder said: —

"Well, Margarita, I guess we're ruined — Jim and me and Tom — all of us. I see no earthly way out of it."

"What's the matter?" asked Madam Jeffreys, folding her knitting and placing it in her lap with great deliberation. Rita dropped her book, and went over to her father.

"Williams, I suppose?" queried Madam Jeffreys.

"Yes; he has had orders from home to collect the money we owe the house, or else to take the store, the farm, our household furniture, everything, at once. Williams leaves for home Christmas Day, and everything must be settled before then. He gives us till to-morrow noon to raise the money. But that is not the worst," continued Mr. Bays, nervously, rising and turning his back to the fire, "Tom has — has overdrawn his account more than a thousand dollars in Williams's office. Williams don't call it 'overdrawn.' He calls it embezzlement, theft. Tom and me went to Judge Blackford and told him just how the money was taken. The Judge says Williams is right about it; it is embezzlement, and Williams says the firm insists on prosecuting Tom and sending him to the penitentiary if the money is not replaced. God only knows what we are to do, Margarita. The farm is mortgaged for its full value, and so far as I can see we are ruined, ruined." Tears began to flow over his cheeks, and Rita, drawing his face down to hers, stood on tiptoe and tried to kiss the tears away.

"Let me go to see Billy Little," she said in desperation. "He will lend us the money; I know he will."

"Like h— he will," cried gentle Tom. "Dic asked him to loan me enough money to pay my overdraft — said he would go on the note — but he refused point blank; said the twenty-three hundred dollars he loaned father and Uncle Jim Fisher was all the money he had. The miserly old curmudgeon!"

Mrs. Bays went weeping to Tom's side. "Poor Tom, my dear, dear son," she whimpered, trying to embrace him.

Dear son roughly repulsed her, saying: "There's no need to go outside of our family for help. If Rita wasn't the most selfish, ungrateful fool alive, she'd settle all our troubles by one word."

"Would you have me sell myself, Tom?" asked the ungrateful sister.

"Of course I would!! sell yourself!! rot!! You'd be getting a mighty good price. There's lots better-looking girls 'en you would jump at the chance. Sell yourself? Ain't Williams a fine gentleman? Where's another like him? Ain't he rich? Ain't he everything a girl could want in a man — everything but a green country clod-hopper?"

"All that may be true, Tom, but I can't marry him. I can't," returned Rita, weeping and sobbing in her father's arms.

"Can't you, Rita?" asked Mr. Bays. "All that Tom says about him is true, every word. Williams is good enough for any girl in the world but you. No man is that. You would soon forget Dic."

"No, no, father, never, never, in all my life."

"And you would soon learn to like Williams," continued the distracted father. "Please, Rita, try to do this and save me and Tom."

"She shall do it," cried Madam Jeffreys, taking courage from the knowledge that at last her husband was her ally. She went to Rita and pulled her from her father's arms. "She shall do it or go into the street this very night, never to enter my house again. I'll never speak to her again if she don't. It will pain me to treat my own flesh and blood so harshly, but it is my duty — my duty. I have toiled and suffered and endured for her sake all my life, and it will almost kill me to turn against her now; but if she don't save her father and brother, I surely will. God tells me it is my duty. I do not care for myself. I have eaten husks all my life, ever since I got married, and I can die eating them; but for the sake of my dear husband and my dear son who bears his own father's name, it is my duty, God tells me it is my duty to spurn her. It is but duty and justice; and justice to all is my motto. It was my father's motto." She was a wordy orator, but her vocabulary was limited;

and after several repetitions of the foregoing sentiments, she turned from oratory to anatomy. "Oh, my heart," she cried, placing her hand upon her breast, "I believe I am about to die."

She sank gasping into the chair, from which she had risen to hurl her Philippic at Rita's head, and by sheer force of her indomitable will caused a most alarming pallor to overspread her face. Rita ran for the camphor, Mr. Bays fetched the whiskey, and under these restoratives Madam Jeffreys so far recovered that her husband and son were able to remove her from the chair to the bed. Rita, in tribulation and tears, sat upon the bedside, chafing her mother's hands and doing all in her power to relieve the sufferer.

"Don't touch me, ungrateful child," cried Mrs. Margarita, "don't touch me! If you won't save your father and brother from ruin when you can, you are not fit to touch your mother. I am dying now," she continued, gasping for breath. "Because of your cruelty and ingratitude, the blow has been more than God, in His infinite mercy, has given me strength to endure. When I am gone, you will remember about this. I forgive you; I forgive you." Sigh followed sigh, and Rita feared she had killed her parent.

"Oh, mother," she sobbed, "I will do what you wish. Ah, no, I can't. I can't do it. Don't ask me."

"Beg her, father, beg her," whispered Mrs. Bays to her spouse when she saw that Rita was wavering. Bays hesitated; but a look from the bed brought him to a proper condition of obedience: —

"Rita, won't you save your father and brother?" he asked, taking his daughter's hands in his own. "We are all ruined and disgraced and lost forever if you do not. Rita, I beg you to do this for my sake."

The father's appeal she could not withstand. She cov-

ered her face with her hands; then, suddenly drawing herself upright and drying her tears, she said in a low voice, "I will."

Those two little words changed the world for father and son from darkness to light. They seemed also to possess wonderful curative powers for heart trouble, for within three minutes they snatched my Lady Jeffreys from the jaws of death and placed her upright in the bed. Within another minute she was on her feet, well and hearty as ever, busily engaged evolving a plan for immediate action.

"Write to Williams at once," she said to Rita, "asking him to call this evening. Tell him you want to talk to him about your father's affairs."

Rita again hesitated, but she had given her word, and accordingly wrote: —

"Mr. Williams: If not otherwise engaged, will you please call this evening. I am in great trouble about my father and Tom, and wish to talk to you concerning their affairs. "Rita."

Tom delivered the note, which threw Williams into a state of ecstasy bordering on intoxication.

I beg you to pause and consider this girl's piteous condition. Never in all the eighteen years of her life had she unnecessarily given pain to a human heart. A tender, gentle strength, love for all who were near her, fidelity to truth, and purity without the blemish of even an impure thought, had gone to make up the sum of her existence. As a reward for all these virtues she was now called upon to bear the burden of an unspeakable anguish. What keener joy could she know than that which had come to her through her love for Dic? What agony more poignant could she suffer than the loss of him? But, putting

Dic aside, what calamity could so blacken the future for her, or for any pure girl, as marriage with a man she loathed? We often speak of these tragedies regretfully and carelessly; but imagine yourself in her position, and you will pity this poor girl of mine, who was about to be sold to the man whom she despised — and who, worst of all, loved her. Madame Pompadour says in her memoirs, "I was married to one whom I did not love, and a misfortune still greater was that he loved me." That condition must be the acme of a woman's suffering.

Williams knocked at Rita's door early in the evening, and was admitted to the front parlor by the girl herself. She took a chair and asked him to be seated. Then a long, awkward silence ensued, which was broken by Williams: —

"You said you wished to see me. Is there any way in which I can serve you?"

"Yes," she murmured, speaking with difficulty. "My father and Tom are in trouble, and I wanted to ask you if anything could be done to — to —" she ceased speaking, and in a moment Williams said: —

"I have held the house off for four or five months, and I cannot induce them to wait longer. Their letters are imperative. I wish I had brought them."

"Then nothing can save them?" asked Rita. The words almost choked her, because she knew the response they would elicit. She was asking him to ask her to marry him.

"Rita, there is one thing might save them," replied Roger of the craven heart. "You know what that is. I have spoken of it so often I am almost ashamed to speak again." Well he might be.

"Well, what is it? Go on," said Rita, without a sign of faltering. She wanted to end the agony as soon as possible.

"If you will marry me, Rita — you know how dearly I love you; I need not tell you of that. Were you not so

sure of my love, I might stand better with you. You see, if you will marry me my father could not, in decency, prosecute Tom or ruin your father. He would be compelled to protect them both, being in the family, you know."

"If you will release Tom and save my father from ruin I will . . . will do . . . as . . . you . . . wish," answered the girl. Cold and clear were the words which closed this bargain, and cold as ice was the heart that sold itself.

Williams stepped quickly to her side, exclaiming delightedly, "Rita, Rita, is it really true at last?"

He attempted to kiss her, but she held up her hand warningly.

"No," she said, "not till I am your wife. Then I must submit. Till then I belong to myself."

"I have waited a long time," answered this patient suitor, "and I can wait a little longer. When shall we be married?"

"Fix the time yourself," she replied.

"I am to leave Christmas morning by the Napoleon stage for home, and if you wish we may be married Christmas Eve. That will give you four days for preparation."

"As you wish," was the response.

"I know, Rita, you do not love me," said Williams, tenderly.

"You surely do," she interrupted.

"But I also know," he continued, "that I can win your love when you are my wife. I know it, or I would not ask you to marry me. I would not accept your hand if I were not sure that I would soon possess your heart. I will be so loving and tender and your life will be so perfect — so different from anything you have ever known — that you will soon be glad you gave yourself to me. It will not be long, Rita, not long."

"Perhaps you are right," she answered with her lips;

but in her heart this girl, who was all tenderness and love, prayed God to strike him dead before Christmas Eve should come.

Williams again took his chair, but Rita said, "I have given you my promise. I — I am — I fear I am ill. Please excuse me for the rest of the evening and — and leave me, I beg you."

Williams took his leave, and Rita went into the sitting room, where father, mother, and Tom were waiting for the verdict.

"You are saved," said Rita, as if she were announcing dinner.

"My daughter! my own dear child! God will bless you!" exclaimed the tender mother, hurrying to embrace the cause of her joy.

"Don't touch me!" said Rita. "I — I — God help me! I — I fear — I — hate you." She turned to the stairway and went to her own room. For hours she sat by the window, gazing into the street, but toward morning she lighted a candle and told Dic the whole piteous story in a dozen pages of anguish and love.

After receiving Sukey's letter, Dic left home for a few days to engage horses to take east with him in the spring. He did not return until late in the afternoon of the day before Christmas.

On the morning of that day — the day before Christmas — Jasper Yates, Sukey's father, came to Billy Little's store in great agitation. Tom Bays had been there the day before and had imparted to Billy the news of Rita's forthcoming wedding. She had supposed that Dic would tell him and had not written; but Dic was away from home and had not received her letter.

I cannot describe to you the overpowering grief this announcement brought to the tender bachelor heart. It

stunned him, crushed him, almost killed him; but he tried to bear up manfully under the weight of his grief. He tried, ah, so hard, not to show his suffering, and Maxwelton's braes, was sung all day and was played nearly all night; but the time had come to Billy when even music could not soothe him. There was a dry, hard anguish at his heart that all the music of heaven or of earth could not soften. Late in the night he shut his piano in disgust and sat before the fire during the long black hours without even the comfort of a tear.

When Tom imparted the intelligence of Rita's wedding, he also asked Billy for a loan of four hundred dollars. As an inducement, he explained that he had forged the name of Mr. Wallace to a note calling for that sum, and had negotiated the note at an Indianapolis bank. Rita's marriage would settle the Williams theft, but the matter of the forgery called for immediate adjustment in cash. Billy refused the loan; but he gave Tom fifty dollars and advised him to leave the state.

"If you don't go," said Billy, savagely, "you will be sent to the penitentiary. Rita can't marry every one you have stolen from. What did you do with the money you stole from me — Dic's money? Tell me, or I'll call an officer at once. I'll arrest you myself and commit you. I'm a justice of the peace. Now confess, you miserable thief."

Tom turned pale, and, seeing that Billy was in dreadful earnest, began to cry: "There was five of us in that job," he whispered, "and, Mr. Little, I never got none of the money. Con Gagen and Mike Doles got it all. I give them the sacks to keep for a while after I left the store. They promised to divide, but they run away soon afterwards, and of course we others were afeared to peach. I didn't know you knowed it. Con Gagen put me up to it."

"Well, I do know it. I recognized you when you climbed out the window, and did not shoot you because you

were Rita's brother. I said nothing of the robbery for the same reason, but I made a mistake. Leave my store. Get out of the state at once. If you are here Christmas Day, I'll send you where you belong."

Tom took the fifty dollars and the advice; and the next day — the day before Christmas, the day set for Rita's wedding — Sukey's father entered Billy's store, as I have already told you, in great agitation.

After Yates had talked to Billy for three or four minutes, the latter hurriedly closed the store door, donned the Brummel coat, and went across the road to the inn where the Indianapolis coach was waiting, and took his place.

At six o'clock that evening Dic arrived at Billy Little's store from his southern expedition. Finding the store door locked, he got the key from the landlord of the inn, in whose charge Billy had left it, went to the post-office, and rejoiced to find a letter from Rita. He eagerly opened it — and rode home more dead than alive. Rita's wedding would take place that night at eight o'clock. The thing was hopeless. He showed the letter to his mother, and asked that he might be left alone with his sorrow. Mrs. Bright kissed him and retired to her bed in the adjoining room, leaving Dic sitting upon the hearth log beside the fire.

Dic did not blame Rita. He loved her more dearly than ever before, if that were possible, because she was capable of making the awful sacrifice. He well knew what she would suffer. The thought of her anguish drowned the pain he felt on his own account, and his suffering for her sake seemed more than he could bear. Billy Little, he supposed, had gone to the wedding, and for the first time in Dic's life he was angry with that steadfast friend. Dic knew that the sudden plunge from joy to anguish had brought a benumbing shock, and while he sat beside the fire he realized that his suffering had only

begun — that his real anguish would come with the keener consciousness of reaction.

At four o'clock that same afternoon Billy was seated in Rita's parlor, whispering to her. "My dear girl, I bring you good news. You can't save Tom. He forged Wallace's name to a note for four hundred dollars, and passed it at the bank six weeks ago. He wanted to borrow the money from me to pay the note, but I did not have it. I gave him fifty dollars, and he has run away — left the state for no one knows where. He carried off two of Yates's horses, and, best of all, he carried off Sukey. All reasons for sacrificing yourself to this man Williams are now removed, save only your father's debt. That, Fisher tells me, has been renewed for sixty days, and at the end of that time your father and Fisher will again have it to face. You could not save them, Rita, if you were to marry half the men in Boston. Even if this debt were paid — cancelled — instead of renewed, your father would soon be as badly off as ever. A bank couldn't keep him in business, Rita. Every one he deals with robs and cheats him. He's a good man, Rita, kind, honest, and hard working, but he is fit only to farm. I hate to say it, but in many respects your father is a great fool, very much like Tom. It is easier to save ten knaves than one fool. A leopard is a leopard; a nigger is a nigger. God can change the spots of the one and the color of the other, but I'm blessed if I believe even God can unmake a fool. Now my dear girl, don't throw away your happiness for life in a hopeless effort to save your father from financial ruin."

"But I have given my word, Billy Little," replied the girl, to whom a promise was a sacred thing. "I believe my father and mother would die if I were to withdraw. I must go on, I must; it is my doom. It is only three hours — oh, my God! have mercy on me —" and she

broke down, weeping piteously. Soon she continued: "The guests are all invited, and oh, I can't escape, I can't! I have given my word; I am lost. Thank you, dear friend, thank you, for your effort to help me; but it is too late, too late!"

"No, it is not too late," continued Billy; "but in three hours it will be too late, and you will curse yourself because you did not listen to me."

"I know I shall; I know it only too well," replied the weeping girl. "I will not ask you to remain for the — the tragedy."

"I would not witness it," cried Billy, "for all the gold in the world! When I'm gone, Rita, remember what I've said. Do not wait until it is too late, but come with me; come now with me, Rita, and let the consequences be what they will. They cannot be so evil as those which will follow your marriage. You do not know. You do not understand. Come with me, girl, come with me. Do not hesitate. When I have left you, it will be too late, too late. God only can help you; and if you walk open-eyed into this trouble, He will *not* help you. He helps those who help themselves."

"No, Billy Little, no; I cannot go with you. I have given my word. I have cast the die."

With these words Billy arose, took up his hat, stick, and gloves, went out into the hall, and opened the front door to go.

"When I'm gone, Rita, remember what I have said and what I'm about to say, and even though the minister be standing before you, until you have spoken the fatal words, it will not be too late. You are an innocent girl, ignorant of many things in life. Still, every girl, if she but stops to think, has innate knowledge of much that she is supposed not to know. When I'm gone, Rita, *think*, girl, *think*, think of this night; this night after the cere-

mony, when all the guests have gone and you are alone with him. Kill yourself, Rita, if you will, if there is no other way out of it — kill yourself, but don't marry that man. For the sake of God's love, don't marry him. Death will be sweet compared to that which you will suffer if you do. Good-by, Rita. Think of this night, girl; think of this night."

"Good-by, Billy Little, good-by," cried the girl, while tears streamed over her cheeks. As she closed the door behind him she covered her face with her hands and moaned: "I cannot marry him. How can I kill myself? How can I escape?"

Meanwhile Madam Jeffreys had donned her black silk dress, made expressly for the occasion, and was a very busy, happy woman indeed. She did not know that Tom had run away, but was expecting him home from Blue by the late stage, which would arrive about seven o'clock.

Billy left for home on the five o'clock stage, but before he left he had a talk with Rita's father.

Soon after Billy's departure, Miss Tousy and a few young lady friends came to assist at the bride's toilet. It was a doleful party of bridesmaids in Rita's room, you may be sure; but by seven o'clock she was dressed. When the task was finished, she said to her friends: —

"I am very tired. I have an hour before the ceremony, and I should like to sit alone by the window in the dark to rest and think. Please leave me to myself. I will lock the door, and, Miss Tousy, please allow no one to disturb me."

"No one shall disturb you, my dear," answered Miss Tousy, weeping as she kissed her. Then the young ladies left the room, and Rita locked the door.

Ten minutes later Mr. Bays entered from Tom's room, which was immediately back of Rita's. A stairway descended from Tom's room to the back yard.

"'HERE,' REPLIED THE GIRL."

Mr. Bays kissed Rita, and hastily whispered: "My great-coat, cap, and gloves are on Tom's bed. Buck is saddled in the stable. Don't ever let your mother know I did this. Good-by. I would rather die than see you marry this man and lose Dic. Don't let your mother know," and he hurried from the room.

Rita went hurriedly into Tom's room and put on the great-coat, made of coonskins, a pair of squirrel-skin gloves, and a heavy beaver cap with curtains that fell almost to her shoulders. She also drew over her shoes a pair of heavy woollen stockings; and thus arrayed, she ran down the stairway to the back yard. Hurrying to the stable, she led out "Old Buck," Mr. Bays's riding horse, and galloped forth in the dark, cold night for a twenty-six mile ride to Billy Little.

Soon after Rita's departure the guests began to assemble. At ten minutes before eight came Williams. Upon his arrival, Mrs. Bays insisted that Rita should be called, so she and Miss Tousy went to Rita's door and knocked. The knock was repeated; still no answer. Then Mrs. Bays determined to enter Rita's room through Tom's, — and I will draw a veil over the scene of consternation, confusion, and rage that ensued.

Near the hour of two o'clock in the morning another scene of this drama was enacted, twenty-six miles away. Billy Little was roused from his dreams — black nightmares they had been — by a knocking on his store door, and when he sat up in bed to listen, he heard Rita's voice calling: —

"Billy Little, let me in."

Billy ran to unlock the front door, crying: "Come in, come in, God bless my soul, come in. Maxwelton's braes *are* bonny, bonny, bonny. Tell me, are you alone?"

"Yes, Billy, I'm alone, and I fear they will follow me.

Hide me somewhere. But you'll freeze without your coat. Go and — "

" Bless me, I haven't my coat and waistcoat on. Excuse me; excuse — Maxwelton's — I'll be out immediately." And the little old fellow scampered to his bedroom to complete his toilet. Then he lighted a candle, placed wood on the fire, and called Rita back to his sanctum sanctorum. She was very cold; but a spoonful of whiskey, prescribed by Dr. Little, with a drop of water and a pinch of sugar, together with a bit of cheese and a biscuit from the store, and the great crackling fire on the hearth, soon brought warmth to her heart and color to her cheeks.

" What are you going to do with me now you've got me? They will come here first to find me," she asked, laughing nervously.

" We'll go to Dic," said Billy, after a moment's meditation. " We'll go to Dic as soon as you are rested."

" Oh, Billy Little, I — I can't go to him. You know I'm not — not — you know."

" Not married? Is that what you mean?"

" Yes."

" I'm mighty thankful you are not. Dic's mother is with him. It will be all perfectly proper. But never mind; I have another idea. I'll think it over as we ride."

After Rita had rested, Billy donned the Beau Brummel coat and saddled his horse, and the pair started up Blue to awaken Dic. He needed no awakening, for he was sitting where we left him, on the hearth, gazing into a bed of embers.

When our runaway couple reached Dic's house, Billy hitched his horse, told Rita to knock at the front door, and took her horse to the stable.

When Dic heard the knock at that strange hour of the night, he called: —

"Who's there?"

"Rita."

Dic began to fear his troubles had affected his mind; but when he heard a voice unmistakably hers calling, "Please let me in; I have brought you a Christmas gift," he knew that he was sane, and that either Rita or her wraith was at the door. When she entered, clad in her wedding gown, coonskin coat and beaver cap, he again began to doubt his senses and stood in wonder, looking at her.

"Aren't you glad to see me, Dic?" she asked, laughing. Still he did not respond, and she continued, "I have ridden all night to bring you a Christmas gift."

"A Christmas gift?" he repeated, hardly conscious of the words he spoke, so great had been the shock of his awakening from a dream of pain to a reality of bliss. "Where — where is it?"

"Here," replied the girl, throwing off the great-coat and pressing her hands upon her bosom to indicate herself. Then Dick, in a flood of perceptive light and returning consciousness, caught the priceless Christmas gift to his heart without further question.

In a moment Billy Little entered the door that Rita had closed.

"Here, here, break away," cried Billy, taking Rita and Dic each by the right hand. As he did so Dic's mother entered from the adjoining room, and Billy greeted her with "Howdy," but was too busy to make explanations.

"Now face me," said that little gentleman, speaking in tones of command to Rita and Dic.

"Clasp your right hands." The hands were clasped. "Now listen to me. Diccon Bright, do you take this woman whom you hold by the hand to be your wedded wife?"

Dic's faculties again began to wane, and he did not answer at once.

"The answer is, 'I do,' you stupid," cried Billy, and Dic said, "I do."

"Do you, Rita Fisher Bays, — Margarita Fisher Bays, — take this man whom you hold by the right hand to be your husband?"

Rita's faculties were in perfect condition and very alert, so she answered quickly, "I do."

"Then," continued our worthy justice of the peace, "by virtue of authority vested in me by the laws of the state of Indiana, I pronounce you husband and wife. I kiss the bride."

After kissing Rita, and shaking hands with Dic and Mrs. Bright, Billy hurried out through the door, and the new-made husband and wife watched him as he mounted and rode away. He was singing — not humming, but singing — at his topmost pitch, "Maxwelton's braes are bonny, where early falls the dew." He had never before been known to complete the stanza. His voice could be heard after he had passed out of sight into the forest, and just as the sun peeped from the east, turning the frost dust to glittering diamonds and the snow-clad forest to a paradise in white, the song lost itself among the trees, and Dic, closing the door, led Rita to his hearth log.

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